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Zools

Henry Ripley

MILLICENT'S CHILDREN.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. BASELEY,

Author of "Lady Moreton's Governess," "Winnie's Sister," &c.

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TO THE MEMORY OF

Walter Scott,

WHO DIED MANY YEARS AGO,

AT THE AGE OF SEVENTEEN,

THIS BOOK IS MOST LOVINGLY AND

Affectionately inscribed.

MILLICENT'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

January without a soupçon of Christmas in its bearing—January bleak, cold, and uncompromising—January with its partings and tears, its return to the bustle and din of school life. Emptied homes — ennuied idlers after the gaieties of past weeks were over. Merry parties, happy reunions, were, alas! only remembered as a thing of the past. Winter reigned with an iron hand. Unbroken frost had lasted for several weeks, and snow covered the ground. Its pale, fleecy cloak rested everywhere with a weight too heavy to be cast off. On churches and houses and trees—earth had thrown on her purest drapery; it had grown rigid lying bare and exposed. A large house proudly reared its head as if in defiance to the cold around. Large, substantial, and old-fashioned, it stood in its own well-kept and extensive grounds, Astley Park, the residence of Frederick Duerdon, Esq. Near one of the numerous windows that fronted the stately man-

sion stood a young girl of some thirteen years, gazing thoughtfully on the scene outside. That the prospect was not a pleasant one might be gathered from the drawn-up features, the dissatisfied expression that passed over her face. It was a plain face, thin and long-featured. Plain, that is, measuring it by strict measure of beauty. The mouth was too large to be pretty, even in repose; yet it was well-shaped, and displayed a regular set of white teeth, regular as strings of pearls together when she smiled. An earnest, thoughtful face, as if the mystery of life even then had begun to puzzle her in the unravelling. Eyes of deepest grey, large and truthful, and filled with expression both intelligent and meditative. A forehead remarkable neither for depth nor width, but still far from narrow. But the charm of the whole features lay in the smile. It was sweet in the extreme, and when—which was not often the case—animated or in discussion, it lighted up, and altered the somewhat sad countenance. It was a winning, pretty smile, and yet Muriel Vivian's face could not be called beautiful, nor even pretty to those strict lovers of beauty who find no charm in a varying expression. If she had been asked whether she considered herself plain or handsome, the question would probably have startled her. Such a thought had not entered Muriel's head. She had never mooted the idea—pondered the question. It would not have been a

thoughtless answer she would have given ; such was not her character. Truthful to a degree, outspoken to a fault, rarely wanting in conceit, was Muriel. On the other hand, had any one inquired what she thought of Norman, what was her opinion as to his style of face, the reply would have been quickly and readily given. She held him as the greatest hero ever born. Handsome, gifted, brave, and intelligent, noble beyond compare, and lovable beyond any words she could ever utter.

Truly she was right, as we hope to show you, dear reader. There are few Norman Vivians in the world. Her thoughts that afternoon were full of him as she gazed so thoughtfully on the snow-covered ground. The park before her was one white sheet. The trees, standing like naked giants, tall and with outstretched arms, powerless to throw the fragile speck off as it fell, hiding their bareness. Its white, feathery flakes shone everywhere, glistening from rays of light in the midday sun. But daylight was fading now, and daylight goes quickly in January. Darkness coming on, and the scene outside was not encouraging.

Muriel heaved a deep sigh.

"I wish Norman was at home. What a long, cold walk he will have. If the carriage could only fetch him," she thought to herself. "Why, oh why, did he go to-day? Mr. Duerdon even said

he might as well wait until to-morrow to make a beginning. It is a fortunate thing he is pretty strong. I shall ask"—

"Come away from that window," said a sharp voice from behind. "You quite give one the shivers standing there moonstruck, or something else unpleasant. You are always doing something that no one else ever does. Come and sit down."

Muriel turned suddenly.

"I did not know you were there," she answered timidly. "You must have entered the room very quietly."

"I did nothing of the kind," answered Mrs. Duerdon, with more asperity than politeness. "You know now at any rate. Come and sit down, I say."

Muriel obeyed somewhat awkwardly, not that she was an awkward girl, but she was afraid of provoking Mrs. Duerdon's wrath, which was always easily raised.

The room in which they were was a long one, lighted at one end by three large windows. At the opposite end was a massive sideboard; chairs and sofas all round. The furniture, though somewhat old, was rich and good. It was furnished throughout as a dining-room. A valuable skin rug lay before the fire, and stretched on it comfortably at ease was a small Maltese terrier enjoying the heat.

A sofa was drawn up to the edge of the rug, and

there Mrs. Duerdon reclined. She was a woman slightly over middle age, though from her youthful style of dress she might have passed for younger. Scarcely of middle height, very thin and nipped-looking, and wonderfully got up, with a most unpleasant expression of face. She admired her own style exceedingly: and it was worthy of admiration if the hours she spent in arranging and planning, and in afterwards decking herself out, were of any account; moreover it was not without merit amongst a certain class of people, people who place dress and a stylish display of it very high, and think no one nice who is not so attired. Almost the only interest Mrs. Duerdon had in life was in dress; at any rate it was the only one to which she owned. She and her maid, Major, were good friends on this point. The latest fashions, the newest designs, engrossed their attention for a week. Her husband, her little boy, her *ménage*, or the two orphan children who made their home with the Duerdons, scarcely ever aroused her anxiety. She could—and even did, it is true—make herself obnoxious to one and all of them at times, but that was only when it suited her purpose. A more affected, selfish woman, or a more vain and jealous one, it would be difficult to find. She was not a favourite in the neighbourhood owing to the grand airs she put on, but for the sake of her husband and her wealth she was tolerated—a woman whose face could

be wreathed in smiles to those whose acquaintance she wished to cultivate, but whose manner was as the sharpest biting frost to any whom she wished to set down.

"Stir the fire, Muriel, and put some coal on. It is a pity to ring for Parkyn whilst you stand there idle, awkwardly leaning against the table. Do make yourself useful; it's quite painful to see you lolling about everywhere."

It was on the tip of Muriel's tongue to say she had not been lolling against the window when called away from there, but she restrained herself. Mrs. Duerdon was not in the possession of the sweetest of tempers, and if, moreover, there was any one whom Muriel feared to offend, it was her benefactress; she was so completely in her power. So, instead of speaking, Muriel walked forward to obey the mandate. Within a few steps of the fender her foot caught in the rug, and she stumbled, the coals flying everywhere. To save herself from falling she knocked accidentally against the pampered Maltese, sending it yelping and howling under the sofa. Her own head came violently in contact with a sharp corner of the mantelpiece. Stunned, dazed by the blow, for an instant she stood immovable.

"My precious Bijou, my pet, where are you?" almost shrieked Mrs. Duerdon, in her sharp, shrill tones. "Where are you, Bijou? Oh, you bad, awkward girl, you will be the death of me some of

these days," and Mrs. Duerdon rose slowly from the sofa. "Where is that unfortunate dog?" she again asked.

But Muriel made no answer. Her head ached from the sharp blow she had given it, and she smarted also under a keen sense of Mrs. Duerdon's injustice. She had hurt herself; the animal was all right. Why should greater sympathy be felt for its injuries than for hers? The dog was always getting her into scrapes, the petted, pampered thing—

"Did you hear me speak, Muriel Vivian?" repeated Mrs. Duerdon. "You are getting strangely rude in your manner."

"The dog is safe under the sofa," answered Muriel. "It's not hurt; I almost wish it were, because"—

"You answer me so, you dare, you impertinent child," gasped Mrs. Duerdon with temper. "I will teach you better."

And she darted forward and bestowed what might be termed a loud sounding box on the ears with her white, jewelled hand.

It was the first time she had ventured thus far. She had been unjust, unkind, and over exacting many times, but never once before had she ventured to strike.

An angry light shone in Muriel's deep grey eyes, a hasty word on her tongue. But they both died away; she checked them almost as suddenly as

they rose. Young as she was, she had learnt to keep her temper almost always under control.

"I hurt my head against the mantelpiece, and it aches," she said apologetically.

"Hurt your head," repeated Mrs. Duerdon with an unpleasant smile. "I should think you did hurt it. People are not in the habit of falling against marble and finding it soft. In your extreme *gaucherie* you often try experiments of that sort, we all know with what results. Pick poor Bijou up gently and put him on my knee. Mind you do not hurt the dear pet. If you wish to hurt yourself do so, but spare him." She sank languidly into her chair, and putting her knees quite close, arranged her dress into a soft cushion. But Bijou was not to be decoyed from his safe retreat. He had felt his dignity wounded at being sent there so hurriedly; he backed and backed, getting farther away, and finally snapped at Muriel as she persisted in trying to reach him.

"It is no good; he will not let me touch him," said Muriel at last, getting up, her cheeks red and burning with exertion.

"Sagacious creature! Rare instinct," murmured Mrs. Duerdon *sotto voce*.

Muriel drew herself up proudly.

"I do not know what you mean," she began, when at that juncture came a knock at the door. It was a welcome interruption.

"Come in," said Mrs. Duerdon in a low tone,

as if the recent events had been too fatiguing for her.

It was so low that no one outside could have heard.

Muriel repeated it.

"Why do you not go and see who is there?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, "you are very indolent."

Muriel went towards the door, but before she reached it it opened, and an elderly woman, staid and respectable, appeared holding a little boy by the hand.

It was Mrs. Duerdon's only child and his nurse Spence. He was a fair child, with clear blue eyes and a pretty face, something like a doll's. His hair hung in long ringlets nearly down to his waist, he was frequently taken for a girl, which was not wonderful, so effeminate was his appearance. He was over five years of age, but scarcely looked four. Mrs. Duerdon, like many more mothers, wished to keep him a baby as long as she could.

"I have brought Master Owen, ma'am," said the nurse, respectfully; "he is very tired and scarcely could be prevailed on to come. Should I fetch him earlier than usual?" and as she spoke she tried to disengage her hands from his. She succeeded with difficulty and left the room. Mrs. Duerdon having only shaken her head in answer to the nurse's inquiries.

The little fellow looked almost wistfully after her,

he was nearly always in the nursery, and he felt shy in his mother's presence. But he was fond of Muriel, and when she went up to him, and took him by the hand, he was satisfied, and walked slowly by her side until he reached his mother. Walked mind—he did not give one glad bound forward, one hearty shout of welcome with the alacrity of childhood, or the buoyancy of early youth, but walked gravely and sedately as might a grown man. No happy smile irradiated the fair little face, as he lifted it placidly up to be kissed according to his usual custom. Neither was there any fond welcome on hers, she suffered his lips just to touch her cheek, reaching slightly forward so as not to disturb Bijou.

"Take care, Owen," she said, "you will rough my hair. I do not like it disarranged."

She did not speak sharply, there was simply a lack of interest in the child. No unkindness, no actual thoughtlessness (for she knew he was well looked after), merely an absence of that great love generally felt and displayed by a mother.

Owen opened his blue eyes and looked at her. Had he done wrong, he was doubtful. One thing the little fellow felt sure, he had not meant it, he had only kissed her, a thing he was always bidden mind and be careful to perform.

"Go and read in your picture book, Owen," said his mother, motioning him away. "Muriel has nothing to do and will explain it to you."

The child's face brightened.

"Will you please tell me a pretty little story about each picture, Murry?" he asked. "Owen will be so good and so happy—poor Owen is very tired."

It was a peculiarity of Owen's, as it is of many children, speaking of himself as if he were some one else.

"I will do my best," responded Muriel, heartily, and then she stooped down and whispered something in his ear. He nodded his head and walked off, still in the same old-fashioned way, to another table at some distance from the fireplace.

Mrs. Duerdon toyed with the silken ears of the Maltese.

Muriel stood still on the hearth rug, clasping her hands nervously together. She had a request to make, a petition to plead. Could she make it? It was such very hard work asking any favour from Mrs. Duerdon, it required all her determination, all her self-repression. Not for herself would she have asked any favour, rather would she have gone without it for ever, but for Norman, her beloved Norman, for him she would brave much. Clearing her throat from a slight huskiness that would trouble her, and trying to hide her emotion, she began—

"If you please, Mrs. Duerdon, will you let Douglas drive the pony carriage into Jycliffe for Norman. It has turned out bitterly cold, and his

cough was very troublesome. Two miles in the snow will be a long walk to-night. Please let Douglas go."

She would have liked to have added, "and me with him," but she dare not do that. As she proceeded she spoke less timidly, though her voice slightly trembled, and she still clasped her hands nervously together.

Mrs. Duerdon looked at her in astonishment, the coolness of the request, the audacity and presumption of the girl amazed her.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Muriel Vivian?" she inquired at last, "have all your wits forsaken you? What does this last new freak mean? Of all the bold presumptuous girls that ever breathed I verily believe you are the worst. Is it not enough that Mr. Duerdon, with unparalleled generosity, clothes, supports, feeds and educates you and your pauper brother. Is it not enough, I say, but that you in all the insolence of—of, let us hope ignorance, must ask now for the pony carriage, to be dragged out and driven to Jycliffe, for one of you who is too idle, or as you put it, too delicate to walk. Is your brother's cough so bad that he will freeze?"

A dusky light shone all over Muriel's face, an angry indignant look.

"The carriage goes out for Major whenever she requires it, surely it was no great request to make for Norman," said she. "But I am sorry I

asked, not because it was not fully wanted, or merely because you choose to think me rude, simply because it gives you the opportunity of hurting me."

"That will do, Muriel, this is the second time you have tried me to-day. You had better go no farther."

"As for our being paupers," went on Muriel, unheeding Mrs. Duerdon's remark, so greatly was she upset, "it was untrue totally, and utterly untrue, and you know it. Moreover, if Mr. Duerdon were here he would tell you so."

Mrs. Duerdon waved her hand theatrically.

"Spare me a scene," she said. "Your sentiments weary me, your presence is distasteful. The pony carriage cannot and *shall* not go. Perhaps as you say, if Major required it, or any of the servants in fact, I might let it go; they would be going on my errands. But you and Norman cannot have it, let that be sufficient. If you talked to me until Doomsday it would not alter matters. You are a highly selfish, unamiable girl, Muriel, as I am continually telling you. Go and amuse Owen, see if for once you cannot make yourself useful."

Without another word Muriel walked away to the child, showing nothing in her outward demeanour of the hot war that was raging within. There was a sharp rebellious battle being fought there.

"Perhaps after all Norman would as soon walk home," she said to herself, as if trying to find comfort in the thought. "I had much better have asked Mr. Duerdon, or Douglas even, he could have gone on his own responsibility. If I had only known for certain what answer she would have given me, I would sooner have died than given her the opportunity of wounding my inmost feelings. Paupers too! how cruel of her."

She found Owen's little head patiently resting against a cushion, the picture book lying on the ground at his feet unopened. She knelt down by him, and putting her head against his hand sobbed quietly for a minute. If Mrs. Duerdon's eyes had been upon her she might not thus have given free vent to her sorrow, but luckily they were sitting behind that lady.

"Don't cry, Murry, please don't," pleaded Owen, pathetically.

He had all a child's objection to tears plainly shown in his little puckered-up face.

"I will not dear," she replied, wiping her eyes. "I am a silly girl, whatever am I crying for? surely not for my disappointment. It could scarcely be called a disappointment, for I hardly dared to hope that she would be kind enough to accede to my request. Norman will see my eyes are red and swollen, and it will make him unhappy. That will never do, I must rouse and not be so childish."

Owen twined his two arms round her neck, and though he did not mean much by it, it was his unspoken way of showing pity, and it comforted her.

Shortly after a manservant entered the room to draw the heavy moreen curtains and light the gas. He made everything secure, even to placing bells on the shutters, then he brought in tea on a silver waiter, and handed it and a small piece of bread-and-butter, cut as thin as a wafer, to Mrs. Duerdon—but to no one else. She always took it before dinner. She was delicate and needed support. Generally it was taken in the drawing-room unless on a Thursday, then for some household whim it was as seen taken in the dining-room. In the midst of the little stir, Mr. Duerden entered.

"Taking your tea, Clara," he remarked, kindly. "I almost think I will join you. A cup will be refreshing this bitter night."

Parkyns disappeared to attend to his master's orders.

Mr. Duerdon was rather undersized, thin and spare, dark and gentlemanly in appearance, dark at least as far as hair and whiskers were concerned. His eyes were light and had but little expression. The worst feature of his face was the mouth, weak and irresolute. A kind look however pervaded the whole face. If Mr. Duerdon through weakness of character never did

any brave act, he certainly would never work the humblest harm. So at least a physiognomist would declare.

Owen jumped to greet his papa with some little show of alacrity. Mr. Duerdon kissed the child, patting Muriel on the cheek at the same time, kindly.

"Something like cold weather this, Clara; it freezes harder than ever to-night," he observed, taking a seat and lifting Owen on his knee.

"Dreadfully cold is it," was the indifferent reply, "I should scarcely have thought so. That reminds me, Muriel, go and tell Major to attend to my dressing-room fire herself—not to leave it to Susan again—it smoked fearfully last night."

Muriel hesitated.

Mr. Duerdon noticed it.

"Better ring, Clara, and send one of the servants," he whispered, *sotto voce*, patting Owen's head gently. "They will very likely not attend to Muriel. They are often inclined, I fear, to be rude to both of the Vivians."

"Allow me to manage my own affairs, Frederick," replied Mrs. Duerdon, in anything but a pleasant voice. "Occupation is good for Muriel. She gets very idle; she should be useful."

"True, true," replied Mr. Duerdon good-naturedly. "We all should."

A frown contracted Mrs. Duerdon's face—a frown dark and repellant. She rarely brooked op-

position; in its mildest form it was a nauseous dose. She would none of it, and it was very rarely offered. She wished to rid the room of Muriel's presence now, as she always did when Mr. Duerdon was present. One great fear was ever with her, that he should study and consult the wishes of these two interlopers. So not only by false misrepresentations, and placing all their misdeeds before him in the most unfavourable light, but also by keeping them from his companionship, she sought to wean his affection away. Was she to be thwarted by her husband? Decidedly not. She gave way to no one's opinion, least of all to his. He was always too considerate for her to mind offending him.

"Have you heard if Norman has got home?" inquired Mr. Duerdon after a pause. "He ought to be here; it is after five."

Mrs. Duerdon yawned; it was a subject of so little importance to her.

"He cannot be back yet, Fred."

"Not walking. I sent Douglas into Jycliffe this afternoon"—for him he was going to add, but corrected himself in time—"for some cough lozenges from Foden's. You expressed a wish for them this morning if you recollect, and I told Douglas as he was there to call at the Grammar School."

This was not altogether a correct version, but it sounded well enough to be believed, and there

was one great merit about it, which was that it averted a storm.

Mr. Duerdon had displayed such an unusual amount of tact and diplomacy in the framing of this sentence, even if it had not stuck quite closely to the text, that he could not help congratulating himself by rubbing his hands together. Owen looked up at his papa, wondering what he was so pleased about.

"Very thoughtful of you, Fred," declared Mrs. Duerdon graciously. "My cough has been very troublesome; you have doubtless observed it. But cold as it is out of doors, I am glad, *exceedingly* glad, that you did not send the carriage for Norman. Muriel asked my permission to do so, but I declined on principle. It would be very wrong of us to bring up those two children with mistaken notions of their position."

"We can scarcely do that," dissented her husband.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Mrs. Duerdon, shaking her head; "it's easily done. They will, of course, have to work for their living."

"Scarcely that, my dear," mildly expostulated Mr. Duerdon, "scarcely that; they have their mother's money. Norman, I believe, intends entering the Church; Muriel will, of course, make her home with us as long as she chooses."

"Umph," sniffed Mrs. Duerdon; "that means, I presume, until she marries, which, put in plain

English, means for her life. No one would surely be so utterly imbecile as to choose her for a wife."

This was such a well-worn grievance that Mr. Duerdon with great wisdom declined to enter on it. He wisely ignored the subject.

"Why, Owen," he remarked, looking at the timepiece, "it will soon be dinner time. We shall lose our game if we don't look sharp. And you are beginning to look sleepy too. Off we go."

Owen jumped up. Round and round the room they went quietly racing after each other. It was not very lively, but it served to amuse Owen. Mrs. Duerdon, going to dress, went out and left them playing together.

CHAPTER II.

We must now take a glance at the Vivians' connection with Astley Park, and see how it was they came to be there. It is necessary to look back some years. The present Mr. Duerdon's father was married twice, the first time to a Mrs. Temple, a widow with an only child, Millicent. This lady died suddenly and unexpectedly, after having been at Astley Park only twelve months, leaving her husband burdened with a portionless orphan. Mr. Duerdon was not a bad man, neither was he a hard one, but it did strike him as somewhat an awkward position in which to be left. He had no love for children, no knowledge of their ways, and he looked upon poor Millicent as a decided incumbrance. Yet for the love he had borne her mother, and with a small amount of pity for the desolation and unprovided condition of the lovely girl, he would not put her away. Is there a fate in these things—that, at least, which people term fate? It seems like it at times. He advertised for a governess, and out of a great number of answers selected one who in every way answered, even beyond his expectations.

Annie Jackson—as she was called—proved to be a most amiable, highly educated, and good-prin-

cipled woman. It was quite impossible to live with her and not learn to both honour and love her. Mr. Duerdon was no exception to the general rule, and before another year had run its course he had proposed and been accepted. One quiet morning in early October they were married—an event which neither of them had ever cause to regret.

For a time things were very little altered to Millicent; lessons went on as before; the second Mrs. Duerdon continued her instructress until the birth of her first baby. After that, becoming somewhat delicate, and her hands being more tied than formerly, she was obliged to engage a governess. Several children were born, but with the exception of Frederick, the eldest—our Mr. Duerdon—they all died. One little fellow, Edwin, lived to be nearly a year old, when he was accidentally drowned by the upsetting of a boat. His nurse had ventured on the water in direct opposition to all orders she received from her mistress, who had a strong objection to either sailing or boating. Unfortunately the nurse took a friend with her, a nervous, excitable person, who was afraid of the least movement, and on the boat giving a slight lurch, she got frightened and jumped suddenly to the other side. The unequal weight overbalanced them, and at once they were all precipitated in the water. Not one was saved, and thus ended the only visit to the seaside that the

elder Mr. Duerdon ever took. Yet it could not truly be said to have ended there, for the shock killed Mrs. Duerdon, not at once, but gradually. The horror of losing a fine little boy, whom she had thought to have reared as a companion for the elder son Fred, and who was in sound good health at the time of the fatal accident, preyed on her mind. She never could forgive herself for trusting the nurse's obedience implicitly, for like most servants, she required looking after, and this supervision Mrs. Duerdon had omitted. The consequence was she never could forgive herself. Every one tried to rouse her, but in vain. Some ten months after Edwin's death she joined him.

Now came the time when Mr. Duerdon was rewarded for his kindness to Millicent, and I believe, firmly believe, that no one ever does perform a great act of self-denial, or of charity, but that in some way or other we receive the reward for it, even in this life. Millicent was over fourteen then, and able to repay in a great measure the love that her stepmother had so freely showered on her by the care of her little pet Fred. The father was very anxious that his son should be kindly and fondly brought up. He had no relatives whom he could expect to help him, neither had he the least tact or notion himself, but felt all his difficulties melt away as he noted Millicent's tender care. She loved the child dearly, though he was not a precocious child, either in intellect or appearance, an

she was all patience and goodness to him. They grew up together as brother and sister, and were in every way treated as such in the house, as it had been Mrs. Duerdon's especial desire they should be. She had ever wished that Millicent should take a fair portion, even as one of his own daughters would have done, and if she had lived it doubtless would have been properly attended to. Mr. Duerdon considered he had done enough, if not more than enough, already, and did not carry out his wife's intentions. He decreed that all should go to Fred, and there was no one to oppose him—no one to suggest that a small sum even should be settled on Millicent. If Fred himself had been older, it is probable the desirability of such a proceeding might have struck him, but he was too young; and had not a maiden aunt of Millicent's—the only relation she possessed—died, leaving her over a hundred a year, the young girl of eighteen would have been entirely penniless as well as friendless at her stepfather's sudden death.

We will not prolong this part of the story. Some distant cousins of Mr. Duerdon's, on hearing full particulars of the case, came forward and offered a home to Millicent. Fred, who was over twelve years old, they sent to school, and he stayed there for the next six years, seeing Millicent in the holidays only. Shortly before the completion of his schooldays Millicent married. She was a lovely

girl, and had many admirers, but she never cared for any one until she met Mr. Vivian, a young clergyman. It was a love match on both sides. When Frederick was twenty-one he made Astley Park, which had been kept in good order, his home. He had completed his college career, but he spent as much time with Millicent and her husband as he could conveniently spare. Millicent was still dearer to him than any one in the world. For nine years Millicent had no children; then three were born to her in quick succession—two girls and a boy.

Things might always have gone on well had Mr. Vivian lived, but unfortunately, shortly after the birth of Millicent's third baby, a dreadful fever broke out. Mr. Vivian caught it, and was the first to succumb. Their eldest child, a pretty girl of three, died also. The double blow crushed Millicent's gentle nature. She would not have known where to have turned had not Frederick Duerdon come forward and insisted on his sister returning to the old home of her childhood, bringing her two children, whom he promised should have a good home with him.

He was ever considerate and kind, and, unlike his father, had a great love for little ones. Millicent felt quite easy about their future, and when consumption set in, inherited by her, it was presumed, from her father, she felt no anxiety. All was as she would wish it; she had no desire to

live, and her children would be as well looked after when she was gone. They would be happy with her brother Fred.

For a few years they were thoroughly contented and joyous, as healthy, lively children should be. Frederick Duerdon looked after them well, and all things prospered. Unfortunately, his over anxiety to promote their welfare put an end to this state of affairs. Loving them dearly as he did he began to wonder whether he could do his duty by them; men were not fitted for the training of young children, and he feared that by over indulgence he might ruin them. He remembered his promise to Millicent, and decided that come what might he must do his best by her children. They needed a lady's care. He thought of his own mother's goodness to Millicent, and determined to get a wife. That any woman would be unkind, disagreeable, or unjust to two so young as Norman and Muriel he never feared. With his own experience before him no such idea entered his head, so he looked about for one upon whom he could fix his choice.

It was a pity that, amongst all the bright, pretty girls he met—girls honest and lovable—he should choose affected Clara Owen. No doubt she deceived him as to her feelings. She was growing *passée,* and had no ambition to lead a single life, and rich as she was—the only child and heiress of the wealthy Tudor Owen Owen, Esq.—she had

never during her twenty-nine years received one offer, or the nearest approach to one, so that Mr. Duerdon's attentions were not to be slighted.

What was it that so fascinated him? Was it her money? Certainly not; he had money sufficient for both. He was not an ambitious man. Did she set a net for him to fall into, or did he wind the coil around his own neck? These things are difficult to be accounted for. Certain it is she did not marry him for love; neither for love of the two little usurpers who lived at Astley Park.

"Millicent's children!" she sneered, what were they to her. She would soon oust them from the house and send them to the rightabout. But this opinion was carefully kept to herself, she was never going to upset all by a too open display of her sentiments.

On her return home after the wedding tour, two little children, beautifully dressed, aged about six and five, or a little older it might be, were brought into the drawing-room for her to see. Most women's hearts would have warmed at sight of them—they had such bonny faces, and were well-grown healthy children—even had they not altogether approved of them being there, but Clara disliked the little orphans more than ever, the work of getting them away would be greater she feared than she had expected. And when Mr. Duerdon kissed and romped with the little crea-

tures, she determined to get them out of Astley Park either by hook or by crook.

"Uncle John," indeed, who ever heard of such absurdity.

"Are you our new aunt?" asked Norman, boldly, his large eyes bent on her, his cheeks like peaches, and with a straight upright carriage, as if he feared no one, child though he was.

"I am," replied Mrs. Duerdon, thinking it best not to show her teeth so soon, especially with Mr. Duerdon's eye full on her, but she did not own to the relationship with great cordiality.

"Shall you love us?" went on Norman, his childish eyes searching her face questioningly, for there was something in her manner that he could not comprehend. "This is Cissie, kiss her," and he led his sister by the hand.

Muriel, a solid little girl, went reluctantly.

But when Mrs. Duerdon put her cheek for the child to kiss, Muriel drew back and said—

"Me not like her, send her away, Uncle John," and no efforts on Norman's part would make her change her decision, all she could say was, "Me not like her, send her away."

Mrs. Duerdon got annoyed, and at last dismissed her from the drawing-room in displeasure, Norman of his own accord following, It was the first time his sister had been in disgrace, he would not let her bear it alone, but before he left the room he ran and held his rosy little mouth up to be

kissed. Mrs. Duerdon just touched the tip of his lips. Childlike he missed the usual warmth, but had not the power of expressing what he wanted.

"New aunt love Cissie and Norman," he pleaded.

"Run away, child, do not bother," she said, coldly, and he left the room.

"What do you think of Millicent's children, my two little charges?" asked Mr. Duerdon, warmly, "are they not splendid bairnies?"

"They are well enough," replied Mrs. Duerdon, languidly, "the boy is a beautiful child, but the girl is abominable, she requires correction greatly."

"Perhaps so, Clara; but be gentle with her. I may have been over-indulgent. Norman is perfect, and the most lovable nature; he loves everything. As a tiny child when he could first walk he used to say, 'Nor loves the tabul, the chairs. Nor loves all things,' and one funny remark he made which will interest you. He was once watching two horses pulling carts up a hill on a frosty day, and the warm breath-like steam proceeded from their mouths. He looked at them in surprise, then what speech do you think he made?"

"I cannot guess."

"It was this—'Nor loves the horses smoking beout any pipes.' Was it not clever?"

"I confess I do not see much in it. What did he mean by the ridiculous appellation of 'Nor?'"

"That is short for Norman," replied Mr. Duerdon, chilled, "Clara you must smile at the children, or they will never love you. We have brought them up so tenderly."

"Trust me for managing them properly, little ones require a firm hand. I should like to see the child I could not train."

"Yet, Clara, you have not been accustomed to children; the idea has only just occurred to me."

"True; but every woman knows these things by instinct, it is part of her mission."

"So it is, just so," replied Mr. Duerdon, relieved.

From this time changes, great and not pleasant, took place gradually in the lives of the two little Vivians. What would their mother have thought could she have come back now? It was only natural in the common course of events that they should see less of dear Uncle Fred than formerly. But it was not natural, neither was it right that his love for them should be estranged by every stratagem or available manœuvre—or that they should be kept away from him nearly altogether. One excuse or another, always a plausible one, was given; sometimes she said they were naughty, and this happened frequently, every small offence was so greatly magnified. Sometimes they were idle, sometimes tired, often too untidy, some excuse was always found rational and plausible. Frederick Duerdon wondered at the change; it puzzled and

it grieved him, but much as he loved them, he began to give over asking for them to be brought. He found it the quietest plan. It seemed strange the children had grown so naughty since her advent, but he supposed she understood affairs better than he, and that caused the commotion. It is true it would sometimes occur to his mind that she had not much love, but then that was not singular, she cared for no one, not even himself, or the little baby boy that was born to her. One thing she had not with all her tact and skill accomplished, and that was the expulsion of the Vivians. Weak and irresolute, wavering and faulty, as Mr. Duerdon might be, he remained firm on that one point. No suggestion she could make, no benefit she promised should accrue from the change, no improvements she could offer ever caused him to swerve a breadth from the line he had marked out in relation to Millicent's children. He had made a promise to the dead that their home should be where his was, and in spite of all opposition to the contrary, he meant to keep that promise intact. And so things had gone on until the time our story commences.

Latterly matters had grown much worse; the Vivians were growing old enough to resent any injustice. Many a slight, or many an uncalled-for rebuke, that would have passed unnoticed when they were younger, they now stopped to inquire into. Mr. Duerdon even began to suspect where the real fault lay, the only wonder was that

he had not suspected sooner. Surely his utter ignorance as to the dark side of his wife's character brought about by his total inexperience of female character, save in the two exceptions of his mother and step-sister, was scarcely sufficient excuse for such blindness.

But until lately his wife's skilful management, her clever excuses, and repeated protestations of doing all for the best had thrown a strange dimming mist over his eyes, and succeeded in deceiving him. It was not so difficult as long as the children submitted to be snubbed, but as soon as they grew to argue over injustices and unkindnesses, she threw off the mask, and spoke hastily and sharply, all her well-assumed listlessness and indifference gone.

But if Mr. Duerdon's eyes were now opened, it did not effect much good. The rod had gone out of his hand, and the rule was not where it should be—it had passed from him to his wife, and Mrs. Duerdon had had the power so long that she did not mean to abdicate without many battles and fights. She was prepared for war. Not so Mr. Duerdon, he was peacefully inclined, he would sacrifice much for ease and quiet, and he saw plainly that if he wished for even an outward semblance of peace, he must desist from displaying much kindness to his step-sister's children. Not that he meant to give up being good to them, not at all, only he would not offend his wife by openly vaunting his affection. This, he argued,

would square matters on both sides, he would not be breaking his promise, neither would he in the zealous performance of duty call down vials of wrath on his head.

It was a weak foolish arrangement, he should have spoken out plainly but firmly, he should have gone boldly to the root of the matter, and wisely, bravely insisted on his will being law, in spite of the anger and rebellion raised against him. It would have been a sharp but a certain cure. Let no man do evil or submit to its power—that good may come.

A more selfish, a less kind-hearted man than Mr. Duerdon might have acted with greater wisdom and with much greater regard to the real good of himself and all around him.

One thing Mrs. Duerdon had certainly managed well, her husband did not care for his two charges as he formerly used to do, but then neither did he care as much for any one—the world seemed less happy, less real.

He was still kind, he never would be unkind, for it was not in his nature, but not kind with the depth of love as heretofore. His wife, whatever she had failed to accomplish, had most certainly weaned his affection to a great extent It was doubtful whether he even loved his own son as he once loved them. Things began to weary him, as continual annoyances which we have to bear tamely do weary us. Thus much for the retrospect, we can now proceed.

CHAPTER III.

When Muriel left the dining-room to find Major and deliver Mrs. Duerdon's message, she proceeded slowly up the schoolroom staircase. It was farther round, for she had to cross the hall, where the wide stairs were, and on down a passage to the side of the house. She did this wisely, for though she had never been distinctly forbidden the privilege of using the front staircase, she had been pretty plainly given to understand that such a proceeding would be looked upon in the light of a liberty. Her little trouble about Norman had upset her. To the previous events of the afternoon she gave no thought, it was no unusual occurrence to be in trouble, that indeed seemed the most natural course of her daily life; things were always going wrong, try however hard she might to prevent it. But her annoyances and punishment arose generally from her own delinquencies and shortcomings—real or supposed—not from a favour refused to her brother. To think that any one should deny him any pleasure, when he was so thoughtful and useful to all around. It was rarely she preferred a petition, her nature being as shy and reserved as her brother's was frank and open.

"I do wish I had not asked," she commented inwardly, "it was very foolish of me. I might have known *she*" (and she laid a great stress on the she), "would never have granted it. It is a pleasure to her to annoy me."

Major was not upstairs. Muriel waited a few minutes, hoping she might come, but she did not put in an appearance, though it was fully her time to be waiting for Mrs. Duerdon. With trepidation Muriel rang the bell. Major was a grand young lady in her own estimation, and resented having to wait on any one but her mistress. When she saw who it was summoned her, she tossed her head indignantly.

"I thought it was like your coolness, Miss Muriel," she said, walking leisurely into the room. "If I'd only known for sure that those timid, little rings was yours, do you think I'd of answered 'em, no, not for Joe. You might have come to the store-room, I was sitting there. What do you want?"

Muriel delivered Mrs. Duerdon's message. She did not rebuke Major's impertinence, she might have done had she not known such a proceeding would be only the means of getting her into further trouble. She had no power to resent slights, though it was not always she received them tamely.

"Mrs. Duerdon wishes you to see that this room is free from smoke when she comes to dress. You

are to give it attention yourself, and not leave the fire to Susan's management."

"What have I got to do with smoke?" asked Major roughly, "do you think I make it? It's clear enough for any one. Ring for Susan, it's her work, or else try and improve it yourself. You've as great a right to work as I have."

Muriel held up her head and answered quietly—

"Major, you forget yourself."

"No I don't, Miss Muriel," but the girl coloured as she spoke.

It was a just reproof, and so quietly given.

Muriel went up to the fireplace, and taking the poker stirred the fire gently. The smoke came down in large volumes and choked her. Major laughed—

"You see you'd better have left it alone, Miss Muriel. My word, won't Mrs. Duerdon just give it you, and I am not sorry. Why did you not come hunting for me, instead of ringing the bell? putting yourself up for a lady, just as if one did not"—

"Did not what?" interrupted Muriel quickly. "I am a lady, Major, and you will do well not to forget it. But let us not waste the time now, Mrs. Duerdon has sent an order which you will do well to attend to."

"It's not my work, do you think I'm going to soil my hands with dirty, black coal? If you've any sense you'd never have asked me."

Muriel turned to leave the room, but ere she reached the door she went back. She had done her best to deliver the order which she was sent to give, and to get the command executed, yet if another repetition of her message would do any good and save any disturbance, which of course would fall on her own head, she was willing to try it. But Major only laughed. If Muriel feared to arouse Mrs. Duerdon's anger, Major was troubled with no like fears. "Do it yourself," she repeated, "it will do you good; you're getting too grand a young lady by half. All the servants say you give yourself airs."

"Who dares to say such an unjust thing?" interrupted a cheerful, hearty voice from behind, and with a glad heart Muriel turned round.

It was Norman, and the whole aspect of things changed suddenly. A bright ray of sunshine illumined the room—trouble was gone, and out of loneliness and fear had come forth joy and peace. It was ever so when Norman appeared, he was a strong rock of defence, a safe ark of refuge to reserved and undemonstrative Muriel. She flew with a burst of delight into his arms and kissed him.

"How did you come, Nor? Are you cold? and are you"—

"In the pony carriage. Douglas fetched me, by Mr. Duerdon's orders, we had one or two little commissions to execute, or we should have been back sooner, and Murry, it just is cold."

Not a word from Muriel as to her request to Mrs. Duerdon. She was too unselfish to wound him needlessly, and after all he had not had to walk, so what mattered her little trouble.

"What's the meaning of all this smoke?" inquired Norman, "and what are you doing in this room? I'd hard work to find you."

Muriel explained. Told him that is that Mrs. Duerdon was anxious it should be a bright, clear fire, when she dressed, but not one word mentioned she as to Major's impertinence.

"A smoky chimney is a nuisance," declared Norman sagely, "but we will try what we can do." And he poked every bit of wood and coal out of the grate. "Now Major, please, some fresh wood and matches, and we will see if we cannot coax a good fire."

His manner was quite infectious.

"It is not my work Master Norman, as I've just been explaining to Miss Muriel, but you're a pleasant young gentleman, and to oblige you, I'll get what you want."

And it is worthy of notice here, that however rude any of the servants might be to Muriel, they never gave a wrong word to Norman, but waited on him willingly. Major ran off and he turned to Muriel.

"You had better go to the schoolroom, dear, Mrs. Duerdon may be up any minute to dress. I will join you immediately. I am a capital hand at

lighting a fire—had such lots of experience. You look surprised, I often light Dame Watson's and old Sugdens, in Wash Lane."

Norman had a very handsome face. Every feature was good, though the nose was perhaps slightly too short. His eyes were deep dark grey, fringed with the longest lashes, which shaded and softened them. His forehead was broad and high, crowned with a thick mass of hair, and this silky mane of his would fall on the forehead every now and again, and he had a habit when speaking of pushing it backwards. On his cheeks rested the softest bloom, resembling the bloom and down on the peach, and his mouth, though not over-small, was red and full as a cherry—a pleasant picture, and one that all loved to look on. The bright, healthy face was so joyous in its youth and hopefulness, the clear, young voice so fresh and ringing—the countenance sparkling with intelligence, and the body brimful of life and energy, and every action and word so frank, open and hearty. Norman was welcome everywhere, go wherever he would.

Muriel went off, she would have preferred to stay with Norman, even if only to watch him perform such an every-day prosaic affair as light a fire. Norman was Norman, however much he might be engaged, and his society was longed for, even though he had no time to devote to her. But his slightest wish was law. She knew he would not

have asked her to leave him unless there was some strong motive—their love was mutual, so she left.

The large, uncomfortable schoolroom, was very plainly furnished, as school-rooms often are. The carpet old and faded, was patched in many places, and all the old furniture in the house, mended and brightened, and presenting a motley appearance, was congregated there. But large and varied as was the collection, the room looked bare. Two large cupboards contained Muriel's school belongings, and a small table stood modest and blushing in the centre of the room, so out of place and lost did it look. A large fire shone brightly in the deep, old-fashioned grate, and atoned for many deficiencies.

"This is just what I call the height of cosiness," said Norman, rejoining Muriel, almost before she had had time to make things look cheerful. "Look here, Murry, sit in this chair," and he drew up a soft easy chair, faded and dilapidated, but very comfortable and placed her in it. "This is a nice ending to my first hard day's work at school, a drive home, and now this cheerful heat, and you sitting so close to me. Dear, why it might be the holidays again." And Norman put his hand lovingly on his sister's.

"How did you get on to-day," asked Muriel.

"Well, do you know not so well; I could not settle down to work after our long pleasant holi-

days. The day seemed so long. Did you miss me, Murry?"

Muriel sighed.

"That is just what I did do, I missed you every minute of the time. The day seemed weeks long, though I had a little variation to change its monotony. Mrs. Duerdon took a strange freak into her head this morning."

"Something fresh," inquired Norman, "surely it would task her ingenuity to do that."

"Yet this was a totally new idea—a scheme that must have originated with herself, for no one else dare surely have suggested it. Listen! she came to the conclusion that as Miss Bradshaw does not commence until Monday; it was a pity I should lose those few days"—

"There is only one day," interrupted Norman. "To-day's Thursday. She'll never set you lessons on Saturday. Why, pet, she may be doing it out of kindness, but one day will tire her."

"I don't know," answered Muriel doubtfully, "she may, as you say, mean it kindly, we cannot tell, she shall have the benefit of the doubt. But only fancy her undertaking it at all." As long as a doubt remained in Muriel's mind as to Mrs. Duerdon's motive she would not condemn her. Muriel was never willingly unjust to any one.

"Yes," replied Norman, "it's a caution, let's hear all she said."

"Just look," said Muriel, looking mischievously

at her brother, "this is the way she did. You know how listless and tired she always is over the least thing; well, she came in the schoolroom this morning when I was sitting here alone."

"Alone!" echoed Norman, "you should not do that, why not join the housekeeper in her room, it would not be so dull."

Muriel shook her head.

"Well, Nor, Mrs. Duerdon, as I said, came into the schoolroom—this very room—a thing I have never known her do before. Just imagine the honour of the whole proceeding, and she walked up to this little unpretending table here and leant against it."

"I wonder it did not upset and disturb her ladyship's equilibrium," muttered Norman, *sotto voce.*

"Now, Nor, no interruptions. She leant like this," and Muriel jumped up and took off Mrs. Duerdon's languid style exactly. "She drew off her gloves slowly, so," and Muriel pretended to be taking off imaginary ones.

"What were you doing all the time," asked Norman, laughing.

"I was just standing open-mouthed, staring at her in unbounded surprise, the novelty of the whole thing startled me, took away in fact the small amount of sense and thought I ever have in her presence, and do you know in my astonishment I actually forgot to place her a chair."

"No great harm in it, Murry, if you were overwhelmed in surprise, it was not as if you intended to slight her, or pay disrespect. She would not mind the omission for once ; you are generally so careful."

"She did mind though ! She waited for a minute and stood and stared, was it not awkward ? Then with a twist of her body—a funny little jerkish movement—she said, 'How absurd, how ridiculous of me to expect anything like manners from Muriel Vivian.'"

"That was not kind," sympathised Norman. "Well, I suppose you showed her her mistake by hurrying forward, apologising for your rudeness and forgetfulness, and then you got on well for her ever after."

Norman's eyes shone with interest in the subject, and eagerness to know if all had ended well.

"Unfortunately that was not the finale," said Muriel ruefully, "you might feel sure no small thing had brought Mrs. Duerdon into the room, and I ought to have felt the obligation heavy under which I lay for this great act of condescension and behaved accordingly. It would not have been too late to have regained her good graces had I apologised submissively and instantly after she pointed out my disgrace. I got her a chair at once certainly, but I could not apologise, it is such hard work pleading for forgiveness to Mrs. Duerdon. I tried to do so, but could not, the

words would stick in my throat. And, Norman, you should have seen the way she sank in a chair, it was most expressive. She looked at me as if she had never seen such a wicked girl before. It roused me and I—I"—

"Well, Murry."

"I did not like her."

"Mildly and forbearingly put, Sis. Unfortunately that is no new sensation with us in regard to Mrs. Duerdon. But I do not see that any apology was actually requisite; of course if you had made it, it would have been very nice of you, still none was needed. Tell me how you got on; I can guess what a bore it all was to her, and how you compressed your face into something very hard and unfeeling as if nothing in the world ever affected you. Was it like this," and Norman drew his features into a stolid, heavy look of indifference.

Muriel laughed heartily, it was a perfect imitation.

"You naughty Nor, taking off your sister so coolly. It was just like that."

"Hark! there's the tea bell, you must hurry over your anecdote."

"Mrs. Duerdon looked into all the books, touched them as if contact with them might poison her, and declared them a heterogeneous set, did you ever hear such a word—is she well educated, Nor?—said my ignorance was lamentable, abominable disgrace, and a whole string of unpleasant adjectives, while I stood by speechless."

"It was not kind of her, Murry, it was being unnecessarily severe. You were a good girl not to exclaim against such treatment."

"Where would have been the use, she would only have had an excuse for punishing me. Then she took me in history and geography, and when we had succeeded in completely mystifying each other she left off, saying I had exhausted her, she would wait until to-morrow and try if I were any better by then. Heigho! I wish to-morrow was over, I have got all these books to prepare." And Muriel pointed to a whole pile on the table standing up like a small pyramid. "It's about twice as much as Miss Bradshaw ever gives me, and she never says the Niagara Falls are in Africa, or that Richard I. murdered his brother John."

Norman made a wry face.

"Did she actually say that, Muriel? After all, dear, I do not know that we are right to discuss her in this way."

"Nearly as bad, if not quite as that, and many other things equally absurd," answered Muriel, ignoring the last part of her brother's speech, "but had we not better be going? Nurse will think us long."

"Norman, Norman," shouted a little voice, running towards them, "where are you?"

"Here, old man, you are coming right. Make for the schoolroom and fetch me."

A minute and Owen came bounding in.

"Oh, Norman, I so glad you are here. Nurse said Major told her you were going down to late dinner."

"It was a mistake, pet," replied Norman, but he lifted his eyebrows and looked at Muriel.

She answered him as if he had spoken.

"Some mistake, Nor, certainly, I agree with you. At least let's hope so. That would be a climax."

"We will not think of such a disaster. Sufficient for us are certainties," said Norman, stooping and picking up Owen.

He tossed him in the air until his arm ached, and then ran off with him into the nursery. Muriel walked more soberly after them.

"Here's a wild boy for you, nurse," said Norman, putting Owen in his high chair near the table.

"Ah, you make him a bit rough, Master Norman, I fear," answered the nurse sedately.

And truly Owen did not look the same fragile little child. He had more life and spirit in him, his hair, which had been glossy and smooth, as if newly escaped from a glass case, or some other place equally safe, was all in disorder and awry; his cheeks were flushed and warm, and his two eyes shone like small stars.

Muriel was equally changed. The look of stolid indifference which she almost habitually now assumed, or the sad thoughtfulness which, when in perfect repose, characterised her face,

had passed away. Merry smiles rippled over her features, quiet rills of laughter and continuous conversation. She was her own self with Norman, and away from Mrs. Duerdon. It was a delightful alteration.

Nurse Spence sat at the head of the table, staid, respectable. She had once offered the post to Muriel, thinking it was hers by right; but Muriel declined it. Perhaps well for the party that she did so, for with all her thoughtfulness she was heedless in things that pertained to table. One would have had too much sugar, another none. Norman sat near Nurse Spence, his bright, happy face shining with sunshine and intelligence, his dark hair clustering thickly round his well-shaped head.

"I declare, Nurse, I never saw such nice teas as you contrive to provide for us every day," remarked Norman, handing a plate of bread-and-butter round. "How the boys at school would worship you if you were housekeeper there."

"You must thank Mrs. Holmes for it, Master Norman, not me," disclaimed Nurse. "That nice tongue, it's only had one cut out, and she has sent it upstairs. She has taken an idea into her head that tongue is good for Master Owen."

"Wise Mrs. Holmes! praiseworthy notion," laughed Norman, drawing the dish near him. "Owen, you young rogue, I will help you to the lion's share. Mrs. Holmes must send you to me if she wants you to talk, eh, Nurse?"

"Owen shan't talk only when he wants," declared that youngster sturdily.

"Shocking sentiments," said Norman, covering his face with his two hands and pretending to be much shocked, and nurse shook her head. She was surprised at the child. But Owen did not like these reproofs.

"Don't, p'ease, be angwy with Owen," he pleaded. "Murry make Norman take his hands away—perhaps he cwy. Owen did not mean to 'fend him."

At once Norman dropped his hands, he had no wish to hurt the little one's feelings, far from it, he only desired to amuse him.

The nursery tea at Astley Park was always a pleasant meal—the most delightful time in the whole day Muriel often declared. The young, happy spirits were light and free—it was a delightful reunion after the day's separation, and there was no restraint put upon them, no unkind speeches or unnecessary punishments to mar the enjoyment.

Mr. Duerdon paid a short visit to the nursery on his way downstairs to dinner. He always made a point of doing so. They were all laughing merrily as he entered the room, at some tale of Norman's. It pleased him.

"That's right, children, be merry. There's nothing like a merry heart," he remarked cheerfully. "Owen, dear, good-night."

"Good-night, papa," and the child held up his little button-hole of a mouth to be kissed.

"Muriel, my child," continued Mr. Duerdon, going his round, "my wife tells me she is going to superintend your studies until Monday. I need not tell you how kind this is of her—how uncalled for. You will strive to please me by doing all you can to merit her approbation."

"I will do my very best," answered Muriel quietly.

"And I will help her, uncle," interposed Norman quickly.

The old familiar name slipped from him in his haste. Mrs. Duerdon had long ago forbidden such familiarity, the assumption of relationship was, she declared, preposterous. Still at odd times, as the present, for instance, the title was used.

"Do, my dear boy," responded Mr. Duerdon heartily, laying his hand fondly on Norman's head. "How is that troublesome little cough of yours? I have given directions for some cough lozenges to be put in your room. Ring for them if they are not there."

"How very thoughtful and good of you," replied Norman gratefully. "I had forgotten my cough—it must have gone."

"Take care and keep it away, then," said Mr. Duerdon, leaving the room.

Norman's rosy cheeks, clear complexion, and bright eyes looked the picture of health. Judging by appearances, Mr. Duerdon need entertain no anxieties on Norman's account. Neither did he;

it was a natural kindliness of heart that made him considerate.

The educational arrangements at Astley Park were left entirely to Mrs. Duerdon's supervision. Mr. Duerdon had once striven to have his own will in the matter, but had been quickly and peremptorily set down. It had been his wish that Norman should enter one of the large public schools, but his wife declared the idea was absurd, and so for a time Mr. Duerdon gave up the notion, but he meant it to be only for a time. He intended that eventually Norman should go to Winchester —the school where he himself was educated.

Two miles from Astley, or, perhaps, a little farther, was situated Jycliffe, the nearest market town. It was not a large place, nor a town of much note, but it had a grammar school far beyond the average of many grammar schools. Two out of the four principal masters were university men, and one of these university men took boarders—not the headmaster, but the second. And besides the boarders were day scholars from all the villages for some miles round. It was free to any boy born in Jycliffe, whatever his standing or position. This might be deemed a drawback by some, tending to lower the school standard. But it did not. None of low parentage attended, they preferred the National School—unless in the lowest form, and *there* was a strange medley.

One great reason why the Jycliffe Grammar School had become noted, was its exhibitions, or scholarships. They were, or rather it was, for two had become merged into one, a good exhibition, and entitled the fortunate winner to be sent to S. John's College, Cambridge—not that it defrayed the whole of his expenses there, but it went a long way towards it. Parents of moderate incomes, or men with large families, found it a great help, whatever their condition, whether professional or tradesmen. It was even said that one boy had once returned to Jycliffe—excuse the term boy, it slipped out unawares—to the great pride of the place and the equal joy and delight of his friends, as eighteenth wrangler. This was enough to lead other hopeful aspirants on.

There is no doubt but that the original founder of the bounty had intended the exhibition for the sons of poor men only—that is, men who laid no claim to be considered gentlemen. The will distinctly stated such to be the case. But in default of no poor youth claiming it for over one hundred years, the managers altered the rules and left it open to all; thus widening the scope for competitors, not narrowing it; no one was excluded, only more were invited.

When Norman first became a scholar it had been Mr. Duerdon's full intention to place him with Mr. Ritchie, the second master, as a boarder —as a boarder, you understand, not to be educated

solely The fees for education, which were merely nominal, went to the foundation, the rest augmenting the salary of the second master. Mrs. Duerdon, for some private reason of her own, strenuously opposed the arrangement; a wish to be contrary to her husband, or, it might be, the expense of such an arrangement, doubtless prompting the opposition. For in all that concerned others she was a very mean woman.

"You said that you would never suffer Norman to leave your house until he was grown up," she cried in the heat of argument.

"Neither will I break my promise. This shall be his home as long as he chooses to make it so. Nevertheless he will, of course, have to go away to school."

And for once Mr. Duerdon might have remained firm. He had given up his wishes for a time concerning Winchester. Was he to be thwarted everywhere? No; but here Norman himself joined in the petition, and pleaded not to be sent away from Muriel. It would have been pleasanter for him, but how dull, how unprotected, home would be for her.

About seven or eight boys walked daily from Astley to Jycliffe Grammar School—sons of farmers and tradesmen. Ernest Mervin rode. He was privileged, as the vicar's youngest son. He and Norman were tolerably great friends, and this reconciled Norman to being sent to Jycliffe.

He had, boylike, entertained great ambitions as to his school career. One of his fondest dreams had been that of going to Rugby, and Muriel should be in a ladies' academy there, or somewhere near, where they could meet pretty frequently. They were both to be very happy and very successful, and when grown up were to live together. He knew his talents were of a superior order, and had hoped some day to do wonderful things.

Such, however, was not to be, at any rate for the present, so he gave up without a murmur—good boy as he was—the bright hopes of a brilliant future, for he guessed in his inmost heart that as Mrs. Duerdon had gained the victory now, she had, as far as his education went, gained it for ever. It was no slight disappointment, as any one may guess; but with a heroism few suspected, or would have been capable of, he set himself the task of crushing down hopes that could not be realized, dreams that could never come true, striving to be happy and contented over a thing some would have delighted to mourn and grumble about.

There was one bright gleam in it after all, and of that with his usual cheerfulness he made the most; he and Muriel could not be separated; they would meet daily. Not for one second did he allow the advantages of a boarder's life at Jycliffe to tempt him. With great unselfishness

he closed his eyes and ears to all that was to be gained. Muriel at school amongst companions, and it was to be trusted friends, was different to Muriel at Astley Park almost all the day alone, unless for the—it surely might be said—tyrannical authority of Mrs. Duerdon, or, to put it more mildly, the inconsiderate and unsympathetic sway of her rule. So Norman started on his new life, and the walk to and fro, which Mr. Duerdon had dreaded so much for him, he declared to be nothing, simply nothing. All through the spring and summer it was pleasant enough ; across the green fields, by the cool, winding river or shady lane, early in the morning, listening to the sweet songs of the little birds before the heat of the day began, or again in the evening when the burden and toil were over.

A daily governess was engaged for Muriel—a daily morning governess—whose afternoons were taken up at home with several little girls who lived in the village. It was a comparatively inexpensive arrangement, and suited Mrs. Duerdon. Miss Bradshaw was a native of Astley, and, although she was over forty years of age, she had lived the greater part of her life in the one spot. Yet her ideas were not narrow and contracted, as are some people's under similar circumstances. On the contrary, she was large-hearted and judicious, well calculated to teach and train a girl of Muriel's temperament. It was well that it

was so. Miss Bradshaw was respected by all classes in Astley and the neighbourhood. She was thoroughly well grounded in all her attainments as far as they went. There was nothing false or superficial about her, and judiciously did she strive to train the motherless girl committed to her charge, not only in all the branches of an ordinary education, but in those higher attainments also which she as a Christian gentlewoman so highly appreciated. She thought highly of Muriel's unusual depth of character, of her strength and force of will, and of the power of control which she so frequently displayed. Yet at the same time Miss Bradshaw dreaded it; she was so afraid of results if the young girl was not properly trained. It needed such a firm hand to guide the orphan aright, to steer the lonely bark across the foamy sea into a safe haven. Would she without a parent's help be able to manage it? She hoped so, but diffident in her own powers she prayed for strength from above—that strength without which the strongest amongst us is as powerless, aye, more powerless than a little child.

CHAPTER IV.

Tea was cleared away in the nursery, and Norman and Muriel had left it, and their pleasant time there, to return to the duties of the schoolroom. Norman had his lessons to prepare, but he laid them aside to help his sister. All his attention must be given to aid and benefit her. Let it not be thought from this she was dull or stupid. Far from it. She had great brain power, but the task set her was an unusually large one, and above and beyond that, Norman comprehended how little grace for any shortcoming would be shown by her exacting and rigorous taskmistress. Fearless boy as he was, he would have shrunk from a similar scrutiny. But candid and frank as he generally was, he did not confess his fears to Muriel. All that could be done to encourage and strengthen her he meant to do, and the best method of performing this was to see that she was thoroughly well prepared.

"How I do wish that there was not such a thing in the world as lessons," sighed Muriel, as she commenced opening the large heap of books propped on the table before her. "Perhaps I should be speaking more correctly if I said I wish there were no horrid teachers."

"Ah, it would be a delightful world," agreed Norman, "if all the unpleasant things were cleared away, but such cannot be. We must take the world as we find it, trying to make everything in it brighter instead of darker—better instead of worse."

"You are as usual, Nor, quite right. I will set to with a will and master this lot."

"You'll soon do it, Murry, but as there are too many, please let me help you; in fact I mean to do, whether you let me or not."

"You shall not," replied Muriel firmly; "where are your own lessons?"

"Oh, mine are all right; I can get up earlier to-morrow and learn them. Being the first day Brewster only gave us a few."

"You shall not get up sooner than usual," declared Muriel positively. "You have to get up early enough as it is. I can do these by myself, and if not I will tell Mrs. Duerdon so."

"*Sans doute, ma chère sœur.* Nevertheless, to oblige your dear brother you must give way."

And he insisted, and Muriel had to give in.

"We must try and please Mr. Duerdon, Murry," he continued, almost apologetically, and to himself he added, "I will spare you, too, as far as it is possible."

So together they studied, and lessons that in their number and variety, not to say length and depth, would have wearied Muriel, became mere

trifles when prepared together. They persevered through all difficulties, and all were learnt. But unfortunately, as far as Mrs. Duerdon's approbation was gained, they might as well have spared themselves the trouble.

The next morning Muriel rose in high spirits. She was quite flushed with thoughts of success. Her heart beat in anticipation of praise. At last she had done something to please Mrs. Duerdon. She really would get a word of encouragement this time surely, and it was nearly all due to Norman's aid. With these thoughts swelling in her heart she entered the schoolroom.

Mrs. Duerdon came in. Muriel hastened to place a chair—forgotten yesterday—with ready quickness, anxious not to again displease by her former forgetfulness. Mrs. Duerdon, who had a frown on her face, gave no acknowledgment of the little attention; she merely said—

"Your lessons at once. If you had had the slightest consideration for my delicate state of health you would have brought your books to my boudoir, or else have petitioned for Major to hear them."

Muriel shivered slightly. It was such an unpromising beginning—so disappointing too—besides being unjust. Mrs. Duerdon knew she dared not venture to the boudoir without being summoned, much less presume to take her books. As

for Major hearing them repeated, it was an insult. Major, in spite of her airs and assumptions, was a very illiterate young woman.

"Should I?—must I?—had I better?—will you?" stammered Muriel incoherently.

Mrs. Duerdon looked up in amazement.

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly. "I sincerely trust this is not another display of your unfortunate temper."

Muriel drew herself up. All her brightness vanished, and the old, weary, don't-care look returned.

"I meant should I take my lessons to your boudoir. I was not in the least aware you wished me to take them there, or I would have done so at once without being told."

Mrs. Duerdon shrugged her shoulders.

"That is untrue, Muriel. You know all my business is transacted there in the morning. It is like your disagreeable ways. Proceed to my boudoir. I will follow shortly."

Muriel collected her books. They were so numerous and heavy, and she was only small, not having grown as had Norman, and she was dreadfully afraid of further incurring Mrs. Duerdon's displeasure—as much on Norman's account as her own, after all his unwearied care—she became awkward in her anxiety, and began dropping them as soon as she started on her slow march. First the ones in the middle bulged out—a collapse and

a great fall; then, in picking them up, the top ones fell, and again, when she thought she had really got them all safely, she stumbled against something and down she went herself, her books lying everywhere. It was most unfortunate. Mrs. Duerdon did not say anything, but she laughed unpleasantly.

Muriel was glad of a short rest when she reached the boudoir, but her patience was quite worn out before Mrs. Duerdon joined her. Once she made up her mind to go, risk displeasure and punishment. She even got as far as the dining-room door on her way back to the schoolroom, but she returned. It was, perhaps, well she did so; Mrs. Duerdon had not forgotten her. After the lapse of an hour she appeared.

"What a tiring morning," she exclaimed wearily. "I have been talking to Major all this time, and arranging about the dress I am to wear —black and gold—for the Melnotts' party. Black always suits me, handsomely trimmed with gold; I shall look lovely. Dear me, child, I forgot there was only you to listen. Bijou takes as much interest in dress, if not more than you do. Do you not, my pet?" she asked, stooping down to lift the dog on her knee. "Your lessons now, Muriel."

Muriel had stood open-mouthed at the commencement of Mrs. Duerdon's speech. It was a great piece of condescension, and startled her. The demand for lessons recalled her to reality. She

handed the top one; it was her way with Miss Bradshaw.

"Not that one," said Mrs. Duerdon, coolly shutting it and giving it back. "We will commence with German."

"German!" repeated Muriel aghast, "you did not set me any. It was the only thing you omitted; Norman remarked it. Here are all the other books."

"Nonsense! rubbish!" retorted Mrs. Duerdon. "You cannot deceive me. Do you take me for such a stupid as not to remember what I set?"

Muriel frowned.

"I do not wish to deceive you, Mrs. Duerdon. I would not try to do so. You are not stupid, but mistaken. There was no German set. May I fetch the book and show you?"

Mrs. Duerdon signified assent, simply muttering—

"I know."

And when the book was brought, and she looked it through from beginning to end, searching carefully for her own private mark, and could not find it, she still persisted she was right.

Muriel saw it was useless contending. She became as stolidly indifferent in manner as it was well possible to be.

"Just what I expected," drawled Mrs. Duerdon with satisfaction. "I guessed you would be idle and inattentive, and you are. Take this," and

she marked a fresh exercise; "write it and learn it. Norman came to me in great glee this morning to tell what pains you had taken, how perfect you would be. It struck me at the time it would be a new experience."

"Dear Norman, ever thoughtful and kind," said Muriel, with tears in her eyes.

"If you took half the trouble to please others that you take to please Norman it would be well for you, Muriel."

"I learnt everything you set," answered Muriel defiantly. "I took great pains to do everything well, though you gave me far too many. I knew how angry you would be at one imperfection. You could not find another thing I should fail in."

"One thing, as you vulgarly express yourself, is sufficient. You have behaved badly, as you always do. You are idle and inattentive, and besides this you have been rude. Your dinner will be taken upstairs to the bedroom. I shall not expect to see you again to-day."

"I shall be quiet at any rate," thought Muriel, with a dull pain at her heart. "I hope I shall carry these books away better than I brought them."

She began to collect them.

The door opened, and Mr. Duerdon came in. His face fell.

"Not tiring yourself with Muriel's lessons, I hope, Clara dear?" he anxiously inquired.

"I am very tired," murmured that lady. "Muriel always wearies me more than any one else. Her bad temper and inattention would provoke a saint."

"But I understand that Muriel had tried her best," replied Mr. Duerdon, speaking slowly. "Norman told me that he helped her until ten o'clock, and that she was perfect."

"One of Norman's crams then. Muriel has not prepared her lessons. I suppose I am a good judge of what's right."

"Certainly, certainly, my dear," answered Mr. Duerdon, uneasily. "I was only wondering how such a mistake had arisen. Norman is the soul of honour. So truthful"—

"More truthful and reliable than your wife!" questioned Mrs. Duerdon, with raised eyebrows.

"Of course not—no of course not," hesitated Mr. Duerdon, "still"—

"Norman was quite right, Mr. Duerdon," spoke up Muriel, fearlessly. "I did study until ten, and not only that, but Norman put aside his lessons to help me. I know every one perfectly, but"—

"But you don't," interrupted Mrs. Duerdon, holding up her hand. "Not another word, rude girl. Go now."

"I was not going to say there was one that I failed in," persisted Muriel, now perfectly reckless. "You are not just, you"—

"Muriel, you forget yourself," reproved Mr. Duerdon, "speak quietly and see if there is not some mistake."

"I decline to have arbitration," declared Mrs. Duerdon. "My word is law. Fred, send Muriel away."

"No need to send me," replied Muriel, quickly, "I am going. But you set me no German, therefore it was unfair to ask for it, and decline to hear anything else."

Mr. Duerdon looked completely at sea, he did not know what to do. On the one hand he must uphold his wife's authority, but on the other, was she just, was he right in upholding her?

"Muriel, go to your room," he said. "Go, to-morrow I will take your lessons myself, the same that you have prepared for to-day."

Muriel began to speak, hesitated, gulped something down her throat, and merely said "Thank you" in a low tone and left the room.

"You see what a careless indifferent girl she is," murmured Mrs. Duerdon. "There is no telling the immense amount of trouble she gives."

"Clara, I cannot help fancying you have misjudged Muriel in some way," said Mr. Duerdon, thoughtfully. "I feel assured she took great pains to please you."

"I judge from results, Fred dear. She would try you dreadfully. I do not wish you to be troubled with her lessons. Major shall hear them."

"Major!" echoed Mr. Duerdon, in surprise, "how utterly absurd, she could not tell whether they were right or wrong. No, I will hear them myself, I shall then be better able to form an opinion as to her capabilities."

Muriel meantime, her heart swelling with indignation, bitterness and injustice, wended her way upstairs. Lost in thought, she unconsciously turned up the wide staircase; she would not have done it on any account had she been aware of her doings. Such petty tyranny as she was subjected to, galled her proud spirit.

"I wish Norman was grown up," she soliloquised, "and we were able to go away together somewhere miles from Mrs. Duerdon."

At this point Muriel's thoughts were brought to an abrupt ending. Major stood before her, and with outstretched arms stopped the way.

"That will do," exclaimed Muriel, rather crossly, "let me pass. I did not know I was coming up these stairs, but I certainly shall not go back."

"And you certainly shall not go on," replied Major. "Mrs. Duerdon has given strict orders for neither of you to come this way. These stairs are not for such as you, you know."

"What are you doing here, then?" inquired Muriel, haughtily.

"Me, oh I'm different. I'm an exception. The truth is, Miss Muriel, I do something for my

living, while you, as my mistress says, are simply an encumbrance."

"How dare you speak so to me!" asked Muriel, greatly incensed. "Let me pass, or I shall speak to Mr. Duerdon, and you would scarcely like that."

"You can tell who you like, and mind you don't let the grass grow under your feet whilst you go to complain," responded the maid, rudely. "But as I'm in a hurry you must go down at once," and as Major spoke, she laid her hand roughly on Muriel's shoulder to turn her back.

"Leave me alone!" almost screamed Muriel, in hot indignation, giving herself a jerk.

Major loosed her hold, she could scarcely help it. The movement was so sudden it was a wonder Muriel did not fall headlong backwards downstairs. Her books went with a tremendous clatter tumbling one after another, the noise was so great it sounded like thunder rumbling in the distance.

Mr. Duerdon came running into the hall, his wife followed more leisurely, she never hurried.

Major with a very red face came down. With all her little vanities and rudenesses she was a truthful girl.

"I met Miss Muriel, sir, on the front staircase," she explained, in answer to his inquiries, "and my mistress's orders are that she and Master Norman are not to go that way. She would not go back, and so—so I pushed her."

"Extremely wrong of you," rebuked Mr. Duerdon, sternly. "How came you to be coming that way yourself?"

"Mrs. Duerdon has given me permission, sir, it's a long way round."

Mr. Duerdon looked extremely annoyed.

"No farther, not indeed so far as it is for Miss Vivian," he replied. "I must put this matter straight. Both Miss Muriel and Master Norman have as much right to come that way as any one in the house. They are in every respect to be treated as my own children. Remember that, and tell it every servant in the house."

Mr. Duerdon walked away, and Major looked crestfallen.

"Poor dear Major," said Mrs. Duerdon, "what did that dreadful child do, did she try to push you downstairs?"

"She has got the best of me this time, but I'll be even with her yet," replied Major, with scant ceremony.

"So you will," muttered Mrs. Duerdon, "or I am mistaken," and they walked off to the boudoir.

Once more Muriel picked up her unfortunate books, and proceeded this time to her bedroom. She might have walked up the front staircase in triumph, but she did not. She was not at all elated by her recent victory. She was glad of her German to study; all the others were too well

known, to allow even of a look being necessary; it was fortunate that the German would occupy some time. It was conquered at last. She went and sat by the window, and looked at the snow glistening under the mid-day sun; but it was very cold, and though she had a shawl round her, she was pleased when Susan appeared with her dinner, it would help to warm her. It was a nice hot substantial dinner, and she enjoyed it thoroughly, though she dawdled somewhat over its conclusion.

"I will not eat my piece of bread," deliberated Muriel, "but will crumble it up for the poor little birds."

This took a long time, the birds were shy at first, and feared to stay on the window sill; at last every crumb had vanished. Then she washed her face and hands, and smoothed her hair. The large hall clock chimed the hour.

"It must surely be three," she said aloud, listening for the strike. It came—one—two. No more. "We must have had luncheon unusually early," declared Muriel, looking round on her room and its surroundings, as if they understood, "what must I do? Oh, I know, I will tidy my drawers."

But they were tidy, this was not due to Muriel's neatness, for as yet, though she tried hard to overcome it, untidiness was one of her weak points. "Susan must have been arranging them," she thought. Then for lack of something better to do,

she kneaded her pillow comfortably, put it in the back of her chair, and fell asleep.

It was quite dusk when she awoke, cold and shivering, her shawl had not been sufficient to keep her warm.

"I wish Susan would bring a light, I shall get frightened soon."

She jumped up quickly and went to the glass to again smooth her hair. The door opened and Norman rushed in.

"Why are you here in the cold, and all alone, Murry? I've had such a hunt for you."

Muriel lifted her eyes to his.

"You have never been crying," he asked, suspiciously. "It is getting so dark I can scarcely see yet."

For answer Muriel laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed aloud.

"What is the matter?" he inquired, "do tell me, Sis. I cannot imagine what can be wrong."

"I—I—she said," sobbed Muriel.

"Yes, dear, she said what?" and Norman took his handkerchief out of his pocket. "Tell me what's wrong."

"She said, she"—began Muriel, again.

"Don't trouble to mention her name," said Norman, savagely, "I know well whom you mean. What has she done now, what fresh piece of injustice or unkindness?"

"She said—I—I would—not—learn my—German," sobbed out Muriel, still in deep distress.

"Then it's a cruel burning shame," uttered Norman in indignation, "for you did your best to learn everything. Did you prepare it, Murry?"

Norman did not learn German, and had forgotten that none had been given her to prepare.

"She never set me any," answered Muriel, "or of course I should have learnt it. You did not see any for me to learn?"

"No, dear, but I saw the book, and thought you would study it alone."

"Oh, now don't you remember I told you she set none?"

"Ah, yes, I remember now. Did you tell her she had omitted setting you any?"

"I did, and tried my best to show her her mistake. But oh, Norman, it is not a bit of good trying to be good. I felt so happy this morning, and thought how pleased she would be with me—and look at it all now. I am in deep disgrace, and have spent the principal part of the day here cold—starving. If it were not for you, Norman, my heart would break."

Norman drew her fondly towards him and kissed her.

"Poor little Sis," he said tenderly, "we love one another much, and we must try to bear these trials. God sends everybody something to bear, it is good for us, and we can bear any burden together, can we not? But you are shivering,

dear. Come with me to the nursery, there's sure to be a good fire there."

Norman spoke rather bitterly, he could not help feeling hurt that the sister whom he loved so dearly in her desolation and friendlessness, should be so imposed upon, but his smile was very sweet as he turned it on her. Above and beyond all their troubles was the comforting thought that One cared for them.

"I cannot leave the room, Norman," replied Muriel, shaking with cold, and her teeth fairly chattering, "until I get permission."

"I'll soon do that, or I must know the reason why," declared Norman, firmly. "I will"—

"If you please, Master Norman, you're wanted in the drawing-room immediately," said a servant at the door, "Master Owen is crying for you and Miss Muriel, and Mrs. Duerdon is vexed because we could not find you sooner."

"All very fine of Madam Duerdon," said Norman, with a bright laugh. "I did not leave school an hour earlier to spend it in the drawing-room. They let us all off as we were good boys; but I'll go this time, and make a virtue of necessity. Madam must pardon your iniquities. Stay here and I will come and fetch you."

Norman raced off, suddenly he stopped.

"Susan," he said, waiting for the girl who had brought Mrs. Duerdon's message, "are you having kitchen tea?"

"Not yet, Master Norman, it will soon be ready, would you like a cup, sir?"

"If you could contrive to take my sister a little, I should be glad. She is very cold, and a small bit of thin bread-and-butter. Who knows but what I shall meet your sweetheart to-morrow, I will speak a good word then for you."

"Oh, Master Norman," said the girl, blushing, "you're too bad. I'll get the tea and bread-and-butter, and a piece of cake too if I can. Would you like some cake, sir?"

But Norman was off.

"What a jolly big shame it is of Madam behaving as she does," deliberated Norman, "I wonder why we have to stand it; a few more years and we shall throw off the yoke. I would not submit to it for one minute, only Duerdon is so kind and good, and it would be ungrateful of us to make him unhappy. Sis is always in some scrape, I wish Mrs. Duerdon would make me the black sheep instead, I am stronger and better able to bear it. Besides I am away so much."

Owen stopped crying directly he saw Norman.

"Owen wanted you so bad," he said. "Owen cwied for Murry, there was no Murry anywhere, and ma said 'Naughty boy.'"

The little lips worked piteously, and tears stood in his eyes at the recital of his woes.

"Never mind little chap," answered Norman, kissing him, "Muriel is upstairs, and we will go

shortly and join her, and then we'll have such a romp. Let Norman first speak to papa."

Mr. Duerdon was reading his newspaper, but he laid it aside as Norman addressed him.

"Are you aware, sir, that my sister has been banished upstairs nearly all day? I found her in great distress when I came home, and perished with cold."

"Surely she has a fire!" exclaimed Mr. Duerdon. "I am perfectly cognizant of your sister's punishment. She did not learn her lessons in spite of what I told her last night. She preferred to be idle and inattentive."

Mr. Duerdon spoke rather stiffly, he did not altogether like Norman's tone, respectful as it was, there was a ring of authority in the question that he could not but resent.

"Will you allow me to put to Mrs. Duerdon a question or two, in your presence?"

"Most certainly, need you ask?" He wondered what was coming—he feared.

"How many lessons did Muriel fail in, Mrs. Duerdon?" inquired Norman, in his straightforward open way.

Mrs. Duerdon took up her lace handkerchief and toyed with it. She looked slightly uneasy, but she only said—

"I decline to be questioned by a boy!"

"Oh, Clara," interrupted Mr. Duerdon distressed, "tell Norman how many lessons you

took Muriel in, and how naughty she was. It will be a satisfaction to him to know that his sister is not unjustly punished."

Mrs. Duerdon fidgetted.

"If you particularly wish that he should be told, I never took her in anything but German."

"Just so," assented Norman, "you only took her in the one subject that you had never given her to learn, and this she told you plainly. I can stake my life on her veracity. All her other studies were well and carefully prepared. This you ignored altogether. I informed you of it this morning, before I went to school, fearing there might be some mistake or misunderstanding."

Mr. Duerdon looked at his wife. Perhaps he had a faint hope that she would deny the accusation. But no, not any attempt at a denial.

"Go upstairs, Norman," she said, "and take Owen with you. I cannot imagine what is the matter with every one to-day. You are all alike, cross and wearisome. Go at once; I decline to be catechised by a boy—a mere lad."

"That ought to make no difference," replied Norman frankly. "Give my sister her freedom and I am willing to go at once. I do not like her to be misunderstood or wrongly punished."

He was smiling pleasantly, but there was a strong look of brave independence on his face that Mrs. Duerdon might never hope to crush.

"Your sister is at perfect liberty to roam all

over the house, Norman," was Mrs. Duerdon's reply, "so long as she keeps out of my presence. Go upstairs and spare me further annoyance."

"Clara, is it possible you were so unjust to poor Muriel this morning?" inquired Mr. Duerdon sternly, directly the door shut after Norman. "I should be sorry to doubt you; yet what am I to think?"

Mrs. Duerdon shrugged her shoulders.

"Poor Muriel, indeed! What a fuss you make over that disagreeable child. Suppose I did punish her wrongly for once, it won't harm her. She is always deserving correction of some sort. Major even complained of her this morning."

"That does not surprise me in the least," said Mr. Duerdon significantly. "I wonder you suffer her to do so. Mind such injustice does not occur again, or I shall feel obliged to take the management into my own hands, and that you would not like. I promised Millicent they should be as my own children. Only think, Clara, they have neither father nor mother. It is a solemn trust."

"Really, Fred, how painfully earnest you are over little things. It quite makes me feel uncomfortable. I'm sure I for one wish that the Vivians had parents; they make nothing but discord and unhappiness here, bothering other people, to say nothing of the expense. Dear me! the effort of talking has quite knocked me up. Ring, please, for my tea."

CHAPTER V.

Mr. Duerdon did not keep his word of hearing Muriel's lessons the next day, not that he forgot it, but simply because he was afraid of rousing his wife's anger. There was calm outwardly, and he feared to stir it, not knowing to what lengths it might go. Weak, you will say. Yes, weak and unwise. Let no man, through love of ease and fear of offending—when the cause is a just one—be afraid to speak out. We must all do right, however hard the struggle. Mr. Duerdon salved his conscience by speaking kindly to Muriel, and by offering one or two little uncalled-for attentions. So, though Muriel looked forward all the morning for a summons to his presence, it never came. She was anxious that he should see how hard she had striven to merit praise, not that she desired approbation so much on her own account as on his. He had asked her to try hard to learn the lessons, and to try to please him, and in any way to repay him for his kindness to them was ever a great consideration to both the Vivians.

There were hundreds of ways in which he showed them kindness, acts unimportant and trifling enough, which might have passed unnoticed had not the difference in Mrs. Duerdon's mode of treat-

ment called it into notice. A passive kindness, an absence of rebukes, slights, and sneers, would have been welcome to the two orphaned children; how much more active kindness undemonstratively but quietly shown. They never in the depths of either heart blamed him for permitting Mrs. Duerdon's inconsistencies. How should they? They loved him too well to ever question his wisdom and strength. And if, as they grew older, a glimpse into the fallacy of his rule betrayed weakness that had better have been hidden, they each held such knowledge buried far away from the other. He had done too much in all goodness for them; 'twere base for them to judge him, much less to mention the result of their judgment.

Saturday was only a half-holiday with Norman, unless, as was frequently the case, the masters gave the boys who came some distance leave to stay away. Some of the pupils declared it was a shame they did not have Wednesday afternoon, or else the whole day regularly on Saturday, which would have suited those who had a long walk best. But this never troubled happy, contented Norman. He would have preferred to have spent the morning in Muriel's society—for Miss Bradshaw did not teach her on Saturdays—if he might have taken his choice, but as it was not so he did not grieve and grumble.

"We cannot get a whole holiday, so where's the good of bothering? The masters cannot spare the

time; therefore we must make the best of it," he would philosophically declare.

The boys who accompanied Norman in his walk to school from the village were respectable, merry lads, who looked up to him immensely, and owned his superiority to them both mentally and physically by deferring to his wishes. His strong moral courage and fearless championship made him a good leader.

At the time of which we write Norman was only fourteen—one year and three days older than Muriel—though from his height and more self-possessed manner he might have been guessed as considerably her senior. His influence over the boys was great. There are some in whom nearly all their propensities are for good. Norman was one of these; he seemed to have no failings. He enjoyed a good game as much as any, yet no boy worked with greater perseverance when play was over. He entered heartily into a joke, and enjoyed mischief with great zest provided there was no harm in it. It was no fun to him to hurt or grieve any one's feelings; he would, on the contrary, go out of his way to do a kindness. No one ever found him untruthful or uncharitable or mean. Mr. Duerdon always spoke of him as his mother's own boy, and this was high praise. No woman, not even his own wife, had gained Mr. Duerdon's esteem and respect in an equal degree with his father's step-child. The servants who

disliked Muriel were fond of Master Norman. The villagers all round, to whom he was well known, were always pleased to see him. His sunny smile and happy face, his genial, pleasant, boyish manners and kind words, were welcome everywhere. Even Mrs. Duerdon was generally quietly polite to him; if she accorded him no favours, neither did she bestow on him any frowns, and that was much. She wounded him principally through his sister; perhaps she could have hurt him in no more effectual way. There was something in his manner that attracted attention and commanded respect, boy as he was, and this respect and attention on further acquaintance only deepened into love.

The sun was shining brightly, and the frozen snow glittered and sparkled like so many diamonds as the lower sixth form boys filed out of Jycliffe Grammar School into their large playground eager for a game at play. Usually the top school was released last; to-day the order was reversed, and the lower division of it was first dismissed. A hearty, healthy specimen of young England were they as they trooped out. Norman, as eager as any, was soon in the thick of the fray. Balls flew in every direction, heads ducked, and great fun went loudly on.

"Norman, Norman," shouted a voice.

"Norman Vivian wanted," was repeated all round.

"All right, I am coming, Ernest," responded Norman, red and glowing.

He dodged in and out as well as he could, avoiding the onset that was directed against him. Ernest Mervin was older than Norman, but he was much shorter, broader built, and stouter; darker also, for his eyes were a dark shade of brown. His face was not an intelligent one; it was very round and plump, and though wanting in the least pretence to good looks, it was a contented one. Things did not trouble Ernest much; he was not over-sensitive, and somewhat dense, but he was good-natured and obliging. He and Norman, in spite of the great difference in their temperaments, were good friends.

"Would you like to ride home on my pony?" inquired Ernest. "I wanted to ask you before school began, but could not see you."

Norman's eyes sparkled. He had all a boy's keen relish for a ride.

"Very much, Ernest, but how could it be managed? If I ride you will be left here," and Norman's face fell.

"That is just what I wish," answered Ernest, smiling. "Mamma has arranged it all. You are to ride Bob home. Etchell has his Saturday's shopping to do for us, and will ride him back and bring him on to me. Thus we shall all be glad —Etchell, for he will be saved the walk one way; you, for you will get a ride, and me, because I gain a longer game at snowball. The upper division of the sixth will soon be out, and then we

shall have a glorious game. Are you sure you would rather start yet?"

"Thanks, very much; I will go immediately," replied Norman with alacrity. "Is Bob in his old place?"

"Yes; you will find him round the corner."

Norman ran off. He found the groom holding the pony.

"I am going to take Bob instead of Master Mervin," said Norman pleasantly.

"All right, sir; them's my orders."

Norman mounted, and soon galloped off. The frosty air and quick ride were very exhilarating. He was at the end of the village near the high road that led both to the vicarage on one turn and to Astley Park on the other, when he met Muriel.

Wearied out with waiting for her lessons to be asked for, she had at last given up all hope, and accidentally coming across Mr. Duerdon, he patted her kindly on the cheek and told her she might go and meet Norman. This was a great privilege, and she hurried off delighted at the unexpected permission. She hoped to nearly reach Jycliffe. What a grand walk it would be. The colour shone in her cheeks; health and spirits brightened her eyes. She felt like a caged bird set free.

"Muriel, you out!" exclaimed Norman in astonishment. "What induced Madam to let you come alone?"

"I don't fancy she knows, Nor. Mr. Duerdon

said a walk would do me good, and if I wrapped up well and walked quickly it would bring the roses in my cheeks."

"So it has done, Murry—soft crimson roses so pretty."

Muriel laughed merrily.

"Is it not nice altogether, Norman—a bright day, a pleasant walk, and nearly an hour before lunch?" Then she lowered her voice. "Uncle Fred has been so kind to me to-day, Nor. He kissed me once, and said he thought I was trying to be good, and that dear mamma would look down and help me. I always think that is such a nice idea of his about mamma watching us; it seems to make God and heaven nearer."

"So it is, darling; it is a help to us both," replied Norman, walking his pony to suit his sister's pace. "You will not go in the vicarage gate, I premise?"

"Not unless we call."

"We had better not call this morning, as Madam will let us go there pretty frequently, and it is rarely we get an hour like this. I will ride quickly to the stables, and be back in a couple of cracks."

He was scarcely longer.

"How is Madam this morning?" he asked, on rejoining his sister.

"She appears much the same as usual," answered Muriel quietly; "but you see I have been

out of her way. Please do not let us talk about her."

"Have you any money with you?" was Norman's next question. "My purse is at home."

Muriel felt in her pocket, and after a long search produced threepence-halfpenny in coppers.

"This is all I have in the world, Nor. Let us put it to the best use. What can we buy?"

"You know Thompson the carrier, Murry, and how fond he is of his little children?"

Muriel nodded her head.

"Well, dear, they have all been taken ill, and Dr. Green does not know what is the matter with them. I thought if we took them a few oranges they"—

"But," interrupted Muriel, "the Thompsons are too well off surely for us to spend our money on them?"

"They are not exactly poor," replied Norman, "but children always like oranges, and then, dear, it is a nice opportunity for us to show sympathy with the parents. Thompson has been very good to me. Several times when it was wet I had a ride in his covered cart."

"Oh, how could you, Nor?" exclaimed Muriel reproachfully.

"Easily and thankfully, dear," laughed Norman, "and I enjoyed a chat with him besides. What say you, Murry, to buying the oranges?"

"That it is a famous idea, and just like you,

Norman," answered Muriel readily. "It's far better than spending the money on ourselves."

"Oh, we will have something good too, never fear, by-and-bye. I have a little reserve fund," laughed Norman again, more heartily than ever. He knew Muriel had a sweet tooth. "Let's turn up the village and go to Adams'."

They walked on. Suddenly Muriel stopped; an idea had struck her.

"Would it be wrong to"—

"Would what be wrong?" questioned her brother, puzzled by the hastily checked speech.

"I will ask Mrs. Adams," was all her reply.

Muriel was very shy and reserved with all strangers, and it was not until Norman had bought the oranges and paid for them that she ventured to speak.

"Can you tell me, Mrs. Adams, what is the matter with the young Thompsons? Is it anything infectious?" she then asked timidly.

"'Fectious enough," responded that worthy matron. "The doctor were here this morning buying some Yarmouth bloaters. 'There's none so fine nowhere else, Mrs. Adams,' he says, in that offhand way of his, and I makes bold to ask what were the matter there. 'Scarlet fever, my good woman,' were his reply."

"Is scarlet fever bad?" asked Muriel in a low tone.

"Bad!" echoed the woman. "Bless your

heart, Miss Vivian, there ain't nothing worse. It kills more'n anything else ever does in my belief. Why, child, few ever gets cured."

"Thank you," replied Muriel quietly.

Her face went rather pale, but she said no more.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Adams," spoke up Norman in his open way, and they left the shop.

"What made you ask such a funny question, Muriel?" inquired Norman, surprised at the unusual interest she had taken in the Thompsons.

"Oh, don't you see, Nor dear, we cannot now go to their house; it would not do."

"Why not? You surely are not afraid, Sis?"

"Not on my own account; but how about Owen?"

"You brave, thoughtful girl," declared Norman with pride. "There never was any one so considerate as you always are. I will tell you what we can do. Let us hurry to Dawson's; he goes by their cottage every day on his way home to dinner, and he will leave the oranges for us."

They had both reason afterwards to be thankful that they had observed these precautions. It was getting towards one o'clock as they entered the park gates. There they met Mr. Duerdon; he was walking quickly.

"Are you going out, Uncle Fred?" asked Norman.

"Yes, my boy, on an errand."

"Can I not do it for you? Muriel and I will run back."

Mr. Duerdon hesitated.

"Are you tired?" he inquired kindly.

"Not in the least, Uncle Fred. I rode home from school."

"Well, then, you shall go for me. You will be quicker, and quite as efficient as myself. Run and ask the doctor to come and see Owen, at once if he possibly can. The child is fretful and feverish; I scarcely know what to think of him. Tell him I should like advice. The symptoms are not altogether good."

"May I go too?" pleaded Muriel. "I will run as quickly as Norman."

Across her mind had flashed the recollection of her conversation with Mrs. Adams, and she felt as if she must almost fly.

"No," replied Mr. Duerdon; "we will walk back together."

Muriel gave a wistful look at her brother as she turned homewards. Norman was off like a shot. Luncheon was delayed by Mrs. Duerdon's gracious permission for fully one quarter of an hour, but as Norman did not return the meal commenced without him.

"Dr. Green must have been from home," remarked Mr. Duerdon, "and Norman is waiting for him."

"Or else Master Norman has made a mull of

affairs," retorted Mrs. Duerdon with acrimony. "I quite give him credit for making a mistake if there's a chance."

"That I am sure he won't," declared Muriel with temper.

"Did any one ask for your opinion, Mrs. Presumptuous?" questioned Mrs. Duerdon with raised eyebrows.

"My dear Clara, I think you are mistaken in your estimate of Norman's proficiency," put in Mr. Duerdon mildly. "Suppose if you have any doubts you send Muriel after her brother. Nevertheless, I feel sure myself all is right."

"Muriel can go," granted Mrs. Duerdon loftily, "if she will walk quietly, instead of flying in the unladylike way she is in the habit of going."

Muriel in her delight was going to say "Thank you," but she checked herself. If Mrs. Duerdon saw how pleased she was to go perhaps she would stop her. There was no fear of such a proceeding, for Mrs. Duerdon in her inmost heart was getting anxious. Anxious for Owen that was, not for Norman. She wished Dr. Green to come, though outwardly she betrayed no signs of emotion. She was glad of a pretext to send Muriel. Of course she could have despatched a servant if she had chosen, but that would have been owning to anxiety; she would rather have waited had not chance helped her. Yet why did not the doctor come? His dinner hour was one. And in spite of what she had said she wondered at Norman's

delay. She knew he was quick and prompt, and not at all likely to make a mistake. What had caused the combined absence? After all, she commented, it did not signify greatly. Owen was only a little bilious; perhaps they had been absurd in sending for the doctor, and he was laughing at them.

Meanwhile Muriel walked into the village. Her footsteps insensibly quickened after passing through the lodge gates, but she would not run. Dr. Green's house was a small detached one, standing in the middle of the only street the place boasted of. It was called Cherry Cottage, though how it gained that name was a mystery, there being no cherry tree anywhere about the premises. It boasted of a small flower garden in front, and was railed in off the road. Muriel opened the little gate and rang the bell. Much to her surprise Dr. Green answered the door himself.

"Oh, please Dr. Green is my brother here?" she asked breathlessly.

"He is here; walk in Muriel," answered the doctor, shutting the door carefully.

"Where is he? in which room, doctor?"

"All in good time, my dear. You must not be startled. Your brother has had a slight accident; a mere nothing."

Muriel went very pale. They were standing in the narrow passage which was all the hall Dr. Green's modest dwelling could boast of.

"Oh, tell me quickly, please," exclaimed Muriel

in hurried excitement, "what is the matter with him. It must be something serious to keep him here when he knew how anxious Mrs. Duerdon is."

"Nothing at all serious," declared the doctor, with a reassuring smile. "You shall see him. It is a mere strain to his ankle, or at worst a sprain, and he could not walk. He was slightly faint after I bound it up, and is, I believe, sleeping now. Would you like to see him? You must be very quiet."

"Oh please," pleaded Muriel, "I will not make the least sound."

The doctor took her hand, and led her to the small front parlour. There on the sofa lay Norman, his eyes closed; all the colour gone out of his cheeks, and his face slightly drawn. He looked ill, and Muriel's heart beat painfully.

"We are not so very bad, though a little pale," whispered the doctor encouragingly. "The next thing is to get him home."

Muriel nodded assent.

"I am going up to your house now," continued Dr. Green, "and will get them to send the pony carriage. What's the matter with Owen, the young monkey? Is it a pain in his big toe?"

Muriel shook her head gravely.

"I do not know what is the worst symptom," she said in a low tone; "he is feverish and fretful, and"—

"Oh, in that case I'll run off at once."

"May I stay by Norman until you return?" begged Muriel, with her expressive eyes raised earnestly to the doctor's face.

"Stay and welcome," he responded heartily. "I wish bairnies, ye both lived here."

Muriel went quietly on tiptoes, and sat down like a little mouse by her brother's side.

Dr. Green took his stick and strode off hastily, puckering his rugged features as he walked.

Mr. Duerdon was anxiously awaiting his arrival.

"I began to think doctor, that I should have to come after you myself, and see what was the matter. My two trusty little messengers seem to be lost. Can you tell me anything of their whereabouts?" inquired Mr. Duerdon, leading the way upstairs.

"Both quite safe and snug in my small domicile, bless 'em," answered the doctor. "More of them anon. Now to see this youngster of yours."

Owen was very restless. His cheeks were flushed and red, his eyes bright and shining, and his little hands both lay outside the coverlet. The medical man took one, looked at it, and felt the pulse.

"Go away, doctor," said the child hoarsely. "Owen not take any nasty med'cine."

"No, no; you are right, my little man. Nasty stuff. Owen shall not have any," said the doctor,

promptly. "It shall all go to another boy who is ill, if Owen lets me see his throat."

Thus nicely cajoled, Owen opened his mouth. The doctor shook his head.

Nurse Spence stood patiently by. "Is it bad, sir?" she asked. "Master Owen complains very much of it at times."

Dr. Green gave no answer, but instead asked her several questions.

"Surely it is nothing serious," said Mr. Duerdon as they walked from the bed. "Do not be afraid to say the worst; this suspense is terrible."

"Humph, humph," exclaimed the doctor abruptly. "Well, well, it cannot be helped. You ask for my candid opinion. The boy has got scarlet fever, but I trust from what I see that he will have it mildly."

"How could he have got scarlet fever here, away from the village," asked his father incredulously. "The thing seems impossible."

"How he's got it I cannot say, but that he is sickening for it is a positive fact."

"What will my wife say," murmured Mr. Duerdon, in dismay. "She will think it ought to have been prevented somehow."

"Mrs. Duerdon, like the rest of us, will have to bend to circumstances," replied the doctor drily.

Turning to the nurse, he said, "Keep him warm, nurse, whatever you do. If he gets a

chill I will not answer for the consequences. Nice warm drinks and a temperate heat, and I hope before long we shall bring him round."

"Will you look in again to-day," asked Mr. Duerdon on their way downstairs. "Mrs. Duerdon is taking a nap; she may wish to see you."

Dr. Green was on the point of saying, "Let her drive round to my surgery, then." He was very independent, and Mrs. Duerdon was a type of woman he abhorred, but he stopped himself, and substituted instead, "I may possibly look round this evening, as it will doubtless be a comfort to you. But, Duerdon," he added, turning round and slapping Mr. Duerdon on the shoulder, "there is one thing you have forgotten in your anxiety for your child, and your desire to spare his mother."

"So I have freely admitted, Mr. Green. Come in the dining-room. You mean I have omitted to inquire what has become of the Vivians? Well, where are they, or rather what are they doing, for you owned they were safe at your house?"

"True, umph, true," almost growled Dr. Green, "I did say so. But are you not wondering what could keep them both so long, when you sent first one and then the other on an urgent message?"

"There's surely nothing wrong," inquired Mr. Duerdon hastily.

Dr. Green was satisfied at the anxiety expressed.

"Norman has sprained his ankle," he replied; "but I have attended to it, and it will be well in a few weeks. You need not feel anxious. What may occasion you real concern is the real fear that they may both take the fever from Owen."

"Is that all," said Mr. Duerdon, relieved; "I do not fear that. They can be kept in another part of the house. And supposing they do have it, what then? It is you declare a mild form of fever. As well, perhaps, they should have it. They can be well nursed."

"Duerdon," responded the doctor gravely, "I said Owen, I thought, had the fever mildly, not that it was a mild form of fever; there is a great difference in that. Scarlet fever in its most virulent form is breaking out all round. The Vivians—Muriel especially—are predisposed, if I may so speak, to fever; some people are peculiarly susceptible, and they must be kept from it if possible."

"You would suggest, then, that they be sent away at once?" interrogated Mr. Duerdon. "They shall be packed off with Miss Bradshaw, or some other responsible person, by the next train to the seaside. Their things can be collected speedily."

"No, that will not do either," dissented Dr. Green. "But I have a proposition to make, and to which I hope you will accede. Change of air in cases of fever is, in my opinion, unless under very exceptionable circumstances, undesirable.

When I left home this afternoon I meant to ask you to send some vehicle to drive Norman back in. Since I have seen Owen I have changed my mind. An idea has struck me ; a very feasible one. Let them make their home with me for the next few weeks. I ask it in all sincerity. Mrs. Vivian's children will always be highly welcomed by me."

"Very kind, very kind, doctor," said Mr. Duerdon, quite touched by the kind thought. "But would there not be greater danger in the heart of the village than here in our large premises and"—

"Tut, tut," interrupted the doctor; "do not speak of what you don't know. The fever is here in your house, and the nearest case to me is in Wash Lane. I will take care of your *protégés* you may feel sure."

"I scarcely see how we can thrust them on your hospitality, doctor. They would be too much trouble in a bachelor's house. No ; I cannot allow it," replied Mr. Duerdon slowly and thoughtfully.

Dr. Green knitted his shaggy eyebrows.

"Do not entertain so many doubts and fears, man alive," he said crossly. "I mean to have them, so you may as well give way at once. There can be—as you know—no question of those two children being a trouble to me. I love them too much for their mother's sake, to say nothing of their own. Norman is a boy after my own heart. If I had married and had a son I should have liked him to be in every respect like Norman. A brave noble, gentlemanly lad, gifted both physically

and mentally far beyond the average. I should be glad to welcome them to my home for ever. It's a poor one after all the comforts they have here, but it should be a happy one if I could make it so. I'm an old-fashioned man, Duerdon, and do not care for all this glitter and show you see. However, it's not a question of likes and dislikes, but a case of imperative necessity. They must be kept away from Owen for some little time to come. May I keep them?"

"You really think they will be safer at your house than here," persisted Mr. Duerdon. "I cannot quite reconcile myself to the idea."

"I do not *think*," answered the doctor, "I am sure. You have no choice. Now, Duerdon, say they may come," and Dr. Green held out his hand.

Mr. Duerdon grasped it warmly.

"With all my heart, kind doctor," he replied. "The Vivians are fortunate to have obtained such a kind friend as you. May they always deserve your friendship."

"Tut, tut," said the doctor brusquely; "they could not easily forfeit my good opinion; it began as soon as they came to live at Astley. Send them some toggery up, night gear, and a ribbon or two. They'll be sure to want it."

Mr. Duerdon laughed.

"How do you know what they will want," he asked.

"From experience," and the doctor hurried off.

CHAPTER VI.

When Dr. Green reached home he found Norman awake, but still lying on the sofa. Muriel was on the ground at his side, kneeling by him, her hat thrown carelessly on the ground. The boy's face brightened as Dr. Green entered the room.

"It was hard work waiting, doctor," he said, "it seemed such a long time, and I have been all impatience. Was Mr. Duerdon disappointed at my proving such a poor messenger, does he think I was careless, and when is the pony carriage coming?"

"Any more questions, Master Norman?" inquired the doctor, gruffly. "Mr. Duerdon of course was vexed beyond measure, and Mrs. Duerdon said she believed you had gone on the orange-peel on purpose. She thought you heedless, and wondered if you never saw a piece of peel on the road before, that you should step on it to try the effect. Her final decision, I verily believe, was that you tried it for the sake of novelty."

Norman's face flushed sensitively.

"I never saw anything in my haste," he murmured.

Muriel who was studying the elder man's face earnestly read it aright. Some inward working

of the muscles trying to repress a smile revealed the truth to her.

"Don't believe him, Norman, he does not mean it. Just look at his face," exclaimed she, in delight.

"Don't I mean it though, young lady, what do you know as to what I mean?" interrogated the doctor, making a pretended grab at her. "Umph! I'm joking am I? Wait until you get home, you'll see then whether I am joking or not. You are both to be locked up, in a dark cupboard, and kept on bread and water for a week."

Norman laughed now.

"Muriel is right, you are joking," he said. "We know you well, Dr. Green, you would not speak so—so pleasantly if we were in disgrace. You would go to Mrs. Duerdon and persuade her to let us off. When is the pony carriage coming?"

"Umph, umph," muttered the doctor to himself, "the young rogues have found me out. What discerners of character children are." He walked to the window, drew the blind, and looked into the street. Then he turned back, the view was a more cheerful one, the bright firelight flickered and lighted up the small room. "Now do you not call this cosy?" he asked, having passed over Norman's last question in silence. "Does it not beat all your home grandeur into fits?"

"Very cosy and homelike, and far too comfortable to leave without regret," sighed Norman. "I hope they will not send for us just yet, but I suppose they will."

This reply delighted the doctor, he chuckled and rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"What kind of a nurse does Muriel make?" he asked.

"A famous one," replied Norman, "at least she would have made a capital one," corrected he, in his love of truth, "if—if—she"—

"If she what?" repeated the doctor in surprise.

"If she had not been too sympathising, or tender, or something of that sort. I told her how I had nearly reached here, when I unfortunately slipped and fell down. And of how I dragged myself in, and poor Murry cried, actually cried, doctor."

"Ah, ah, do not blame her, lad; bless the sensitive feeling heart that can feel for another's woes. There's too much selfishness in these days, Norman, I find it everywhere. Each person thinks alone of his or her advancement."

"Murry does not fail in that then," declared Norman, proudly. "I never knew anybody think less of herself and more of others. I could tell you numberless little things she has done."

"Tut, tut," interrupted the doctor, "that'll

do. Girls and women are all alike, they like something to cry over. How would it have been young miss, if he had not been able to crawl in, and no one had found him, and he had perished in the snow?"

"Come doctor, that will do," laughed Norman, "considering it was just outside this gate, where people are constantly passing, to say nothing of the number of patients who flock to your door all day long; you are drawing an exaggerated picture."

It was good to see the doctor's face. He was a tall elderly man with iron grey hair, too tall for his breadth to be anything like in proportion. Yet narrow-chested as was he, his voice was deep and gruff. His face was slightly marked by small-pox, and his eyebrows were very deep and scraggy, overhanging eyes remarkable for penetration and keenness of observation. His forehead was very broad and massive and redeemed the face from plainness. With features strong in ruggedness and expression the doctor possessed as striking a physiognomy as it is well possible to conceive. It was a wonderful face, and it needed not much penetration to read that it belonged to a man of uncommon character. Unique, blunt, independent, determined, yet gentle, sympathising, and original. Dr. Green was one both to be feared and loved. His age no one knew, some declared he was nearly seventy, while others guessed him at fifty-five.

No one knew either whom his friends were, or where they lived. He had come thirty years ago as a perfect stranger amongst them, and people who remembered him then said he did not look at all like a young man. He made no allusion to either himself or his friends, but was taciturn and silent. One or two officious persons had ventured to question him, but were speedily and sharply set down. It began to be understood that he did not wish to be catechised, and by-and-bye it got whispered about that there was a mystery about Dr. Green which would some day ooze out. But that was years ago, and nothing ever being heard to his discredit, the whisper died a gradual death. Dr. Green stood on his own merits, and his position was a high and much-respected one.

"So that's the gratitude you display, my young friend, is it," said the doctor. "You think nothing of all my skill in binding up your injured ankle, nothing of being kept here in peace, and you actually imagine if you had not managed to creep in that some one would have helped you."

Norman was puzzled. He did not know what to make either of the speech or the doctor's face, which was working in all kinds of ways.

"I scarcely know what you mean, Dr. Green," spoke Norman, in a bewildered tone. "I never said anything to imply I was ungrateful, did I? I am most thankful to you for your kindness, you always"—

"Well, well, show your gratitude in a sensible way then. Give some straightforward demonstration of the fact."

"Willingly, what must I do? Mention anything sensible and I will try and perform it."

"Does not your own sense suggest any action suitable?"

Norman looked very thoughtful.

"No," he replied, after a pause, "I cannot think of anything that you would deem a sufficient mark of gratitude. I shall I daresay get an idea before very long."

"Tut, tut," returned the doctor, "I hoped better things of you. Well, well, I must get rid of you. Dear me! to think how blind some people are. Not accustomed I suppose to lonely folk's ways. I'll ring the bell and inquire if the pony trap has come."

Muriel glanced uncomfortably at Norman, she thought they had really offended their old friend, for he walked about the room as if annoyed.

"Please do not be offended," she ventured to whisper, timidly, "we did not intend to annoy you."

Dr. Green stopped short and looked at her.

"Offended!" repeated he, "ah! that's just the word, I am so offended that I am going to keep you here to tea, and nobody knows for how long after."

"I only wish we could avail ourselves of your

kind hospitality," began Norman. "Nothing would give us greater pleasure, but"—

"Well, but—what?" echoed Dr. Green.

"But we cannot, however much we might wish to do so. I am very sorry, Murry pet," he whispered, "but it would not do. Mrs. Duerdon would be angry. Another time, dear, perhaps."

Dr. Green overheard the words, low as they were spoken.

"Mrs. Duerdon would object, would she," reiterated the doctor. "All I say is Mrs. Duerdon be—be—whipped." And the stress he laid on the last word was great. "Out of this house you do not go, until I give you permission, so make yourselves easy. Sarah," to the girl who answered the bell, "tell Martha to send in one of her nicest teas, her very nicest mind—no make-shifts, or make-believes. Jam and marmalade. Eggs and all sorts of good things."

Norman and Muriel exchanged glances. It sounded very tempting.

"You are too hospitable," spoke up Norman, bravely, "and we scarcely know how to thank you enough, yet at the same time, we must not stay, we are never allowed to do so without leave. Sarah, has our pony carriage come? if not there must be some mistake."

"I fancy not, Master Norman, I've heard nothing about it."

"Of course it has not," replied the doctor,

rubbing his hands excitedly together. "Who do you suppose would trouble to send for you. Make yourselves contented, my young friends, you shall not stir one step outside the door until you have tasted one of Martha's good teas—excellent meals I assure you. You big nobs have no idea how well we poor people live."

He kept on rubbing his hands together, it was a habit he indulged in when pleased. And if ever Dr. Green in the course of his life, had had occasion to be pleased, it had never been a greater source of gratification to him than the contemplation of the great treat which he had in store for the Vivians—the children of the only woman he had ever loved. He had never intended to withhold the knowledge of their projected stay with him from them so long. It had not been his intention to tease and bewilder them to the extent he had contrived to do. But his delight was so great at the prospect of happiness that lay before them, his consciousness of being able to dispel and allay their fears so sure, that he may certainly be pardoned if in the over-enjoyment of his secret, he exceeded for a moment the bounds of politeness, not to say kindness. His heart swelled with delight.

Norman got up slowly from the sofa. Dr. Green pushed him back.

"Waywardness, obstinacy, rank rebellion," cried he, "disobedience, and no one knows what

besides. I'll none of it here. Crush the ill-bred vices. Make yourself contented, dear lad; all is right. I got full permission from home."

Norman sank back well pleased, his conscience too was at rest, and Muriel's face shone with delight. Rarely was it they either of them were invited out to tea, never had they, although great friends, ever stayed at the doctor's before. Dr. Green had often asked them, but they had never been allowed to come. Some plausible excuse was always given by Mrs. Duerdon. Good man and universal favourite as he was, he had not hitherto got round her. He was too brusque for her. But wise people soon found out that this blunt manner of his was often put on to try and hide his real kindness of heart. Some would call him a "rough diamond," others would declare "his bark was worse than his bite," but most agreed that he was honest and good, and true. Norman and Muriel had always liked him. He had ever been good to them, though from the very first he had had his varying moods, one time gentle and kind, another merry or teasing, just as his humour might be.

CHAPTER VII.

When Mrs. Duerdon heard of Dr. Green's visit to the night nursery she was greatly put out. Much as she disliked his brusqueness, his cutting sarcasms, and quiet ignoring of her affectations, she could not but accord him her esteem. He was the only person in the whole village whom she might be said to respect. Her visiting at the vicarage, was limited to one dinner party a year, and if she had had her own way it would have been less, for she liked neither the good vicar nor his wife. But Dr. Green she saw whenever he called, and now to think that at the most important time she had not been summoned.

"Did they know how anxious she was about the child?" she demanded. "Did they all forget she was his mother? How could any one expect to feel as she did?" and thus she went on.

It was useless Mr. Duerdon trying to explain matters, or reason with her. She had a grievance and she determined to nurse it. What mattered it that every one had been studying her comfort, and made her their first consideration, if she had not desired to be so treated. At the first suggestion that Owen's illness might be worse than they had anticipated, Mrs. Duerdon immediately gave

him up for lost, "they all knew he was in danger and were leagued together to keep the slightest hint of it from her," and she wept and moaned, and worked herself up to such a pitch, that she became hysterical, and there was a fine commotion. Servants flew hither and thither, in wild disorder. Mr. Duerdon who was sitting by his little boy's bedside, giving him cooling drinks, talking to him, and trying to while away the tediousness of illness and its aches to the best of his ability, was hastily summoned away, much to Owen's regret, who valued his kind parent's society.

"Owen want papa bad," he cried, fretfully. "Papa must not go away."

"Papa will be back directly," answered Mr. Duerdon. He wondered in his mind what fresh worry he was being fetched for now. He would have preferred staying by the little bed; he knew it was dull for the child with only his staid elderly nurse, patient as she was. Owen had inquired for both Norman and Muriel several times. His papa told him that Dr. Green feared their getting the illness that he had if they came near, and the child replied, "Owen not want them to be ill. Keep them away, please, papa, and give them a kiss each for Owen."

Mr. Duerdon had called him his own dear boy, pleased at this trait of unselfishness.

By the time Mr. Duerdon got downstairs his wife had worked herself into violent hysterics, but

almost as soon as he entered the room she became calmer, and in a short time was able to deplore Owen's illness again.

"She had known all along that the child was going to be ill; she had felt a presentiment of it days ago. If her advice had been taken from the beginning, as it ought to have been, in all probability there never would have been any danger. Why had not Dr. Green been sent for sooner, and why was not further advice telegraphed for now?"

Her husband assured her Owen was progressing as favourably as could be expected; that time and patience, combined with good nursing, were all that was at present necessary; that no further advice could at this stage of the illness do any good; and he finally wound up with a suggestion, a very mild one, that she would brace up her spirits, and not give way as she was doing. He had cause to regret the suggestion, as no one would have doubted could they have seen the result. It roused the worst part of her nature; the assumed languor and apathy were nothing to it.

Dear reader, it is not pleasant to dwell on this side of character; there is something very unlovable and repugnant to us in it. Yet in the fair portrayal of several dispositions we should not be doing justice to each did we waver weakly.

She raged and stormed; she called her husband every hard and cruel name. He was unfeeling, selfish, a tyrant, and all that she could think of.

She bemoaned her hard fate in being married to a man who would not try and support and sustain her in such trouble.

Mr. Duerdon was wearied with the conflict. Worn and exhausted, he longed for the return of the two children whose presence was so often pronounced a bore and a nuisance. Never by him, though; no, never by him. They were always welcome in his sight, a link that bound him to memories of the past, that long-ago past when the comfort of their mother's presence shed such a calm and steady light over Astley Park, and made it in every respect a house well worthy of the name of home. He got up, intending to return to Owen's bedside according to the promise he had given, and he suggested that Major had better be rung for to keep his wife amused.

This opened a new grievance. Mrs. Duerdon harped on a fresh trouble, and in the most extraordinary way started on a totally new track. She now blamed her husband for thinking more of the child than he did of her. Why should she be left? and could not Norman sit with Owen? It was strange if he could not. The boy had nothing to do; it was odd if he could not be made useful.

This suggestion as to Norman being pressed into the service, recalled to Mr. Duerdon's mind the unexplained absence of his two charges and the sprained ankle. His wife must be told at once. He never supposed for one moment that she would

feel the accident in the least degree, or he would have kept back news of it until a more convenient time; but he did expect there would be a commotion over Dr. Green's hospitality and his acceptance of it without Mrs. Duerdon's sanction. He wished heartily that he had not, through overkindness on his part to his wife (in refusing to have her disturbed) delayed asking her opinion. He certainly ought to have consulted with her; yet if she had decided they should not go, where would he have been then? Worse off than now. Decidedly, for he was master of the field, let her rave as she might. So he explained all, the accident, Dr. Green's verdict, and his kind invitation eagerly pressed.

Mrs. Duerdon listened in silence, a silence that was ominous. Not one word did she speak until she had heard all. It was a silence that could be felt, and so Mr. Duerdon interpreted it. He would have preferred a break of some kind, a question, an exclamation, an interjection, an angry word—anything to show what she felt. He finished, and there was a dead pause.

"So that is what you have done," she said at last, speaking quite calmly. "That is your way of doing things, is it? What is it to us that Norman should be heedless enough and careless enough to go and break his leg or sprain his ankle?"

"Well, my dear," replied Mr. Duerdon, passing

over this question, "it is something to us that there is danger of infection here. That is sufficient reason for their absence. Dr. Green's kindness is without parallel, and where could they be better taken care of than in a medical man's house?"

"Infection! Bosh!" exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon, contemptuously. "Two strong country children like those! If they had been like our refined, fragile Owen it would have been different. Just fancy Norman and Muriel ill! It seems utterly absurd!"

Mr. Duerdon made no reply. He began to think the idea was not so distasteful to his wife as he had expected. "Perhaps in her heart," he reasoned, "she rather welcomed their absence for a time as a relief." But he was quite mistaken, as he soon found. Her getting them turned from the house in disgrace and her husband letting them go for pleasure and convenience were two totally different things.

"What made you give permission for those children to go," she asked after another long pause, "when you knew it would interfere with their lessons?" Her voice got gradually higher and shriller. "Am not I responsible for their studies?"

"Their studies must stand aside for a while, Clara," replied Mr. Duerdon; "lessons are very requisite and desirable, but health is the first consideration."

"Not for them, two regular hangers-on who must be taught to work for their living. Paupers, interlopers, and unwelcome intruders!"

"Stay, Clara," replied Mr. Duerdon, thoroughly roused; "you mistake the position of my sister's two children. They are as dear to me as she was, and that is making no light assertion. I wish them in every respect to be treated as children of my own, and desire that they should be loved and treated with honour. They are good and noble, winning and lovable, luckily for us, but had they been troublesome and naughty, I would still have striven to do my best by them."

"That will do," screamed Mrs. Duerdon, in her shrillest key. "Who ever heard of infatuation equal to yours? I have seen enough of it. You have given me authority over the Vivians. I look after them, and train them; therefore I brook no interference. How *dared* you," she gasped out at last, "how dared you trouble Dr. Green with your tiresome pets?"

"Oh, come, come," answered Mr. Duerdon, exasperated almost beyond endurance; "come, Clara, that is rather too good. The idea of asking a man in his own house how he dared! That is rather too rich." And he fumed and fidgeted uncomfortably.

"Rich do you call it?" queried Mrs. Duerdon, coldly. "I fail to see it in that light. I asked you how you dared let those troublesome children

become a burden on Dr. Green without my sanction and approbation, and as you have not answered my question, I venture to put it again. I presume as a gentleman you will feel obliged to explain."

"Well, then, Clara, I will reply; but as to daring to do a thing, we will put it aside. I chose to do as I have, thinking it the best way. Had you been awake, I would have asked you as a mere matter of form, you understand, for there was no question as to what was right. Dr. Green insisted on their going somewhere. As you were asleep, I decided on my own responsibility. All you have to do is to make the best of affairs."

"That I shall not try and do. Miss Bradshaw comes back on Monday, and the girl will not be here. The house is quite large enough, and she can be kept away from Owen. She must return to her lessons."

"Send word to Miss Bradshaw that on account of illness she will not be required. You can easily do that. In all probability she will decline to come. Most people avoid a fever-stricken house, and she has pupils to consider."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Muriel's education, in spite of what you say, is of the greatest importance. I shall ring and give orders for Douglas to fetch them."

"Do so at your peril!" thundered Mr. Duerdon. "I have given permission for them to stay, and I will

for once be obeyed. You are right to think much of their education, but as I before said, it must for a while be laid aside. My word is not to be trampled on, mocked, and made of no avail. No not whilst I am master. *They shall not return.*"

Mrs. Duerdon looked at her husband in surprise. It was the first time since her marriage he had seriously opposed her and asserted his authority. She scarcely knew what to make of it, and stared at him. He returned her gaze for a minute, then got up and rang the bell to summon Major. She came, and he left the room.

At nine o'clock that evening a small portmanteau and basket containing all the clothes requisite for both Norman and Muriel arrived at Dr. Green's. They little thought how nearly these things had missed coming, though both wondered how Mrs. Duerdon had been prevailed on to grant them such a treat. Dr. Green was silent as the grave as to whom he asked permission from. He received their questions in a joking manner that perfectly eluded and defied all attempts to discover.

CHAPTER VIII.

Owen's attack proved but a slight one. It was scarlet fever in its mildest form, and though he stayed in bed and was nursed carefully, more carefully than many an one who has it dangerously, he was never after the commencement of his illness really ill. Spence, who had been with him all his life, and who was in her quiet way fondly attached to him, rarely left his presence. Not that it was requisite for her to be always there, but she preferred staying. Mr. Duerdon was often with him, amusing him in any way he could think of without exciting him. Mrs. Duerdon came sometimes and looked at him, and was wonderfully thoughtful and kind; that is, for her. She never stayed long. It tired her too much; and after she was once assured there was no danger she seldom ventured near the nursery. If Owen could have had Norman and Muriel with him, he would have been perfectly happy, but that could not be, and on being assured that they should be with him as soon as Dr. Green allowed, he never petitioned again. He gave wonderfully little trouble, and his illness made not the slightest alteration in his appearance after a very few days. It would have surprised him in no small degree

could he have seen the Vivians enjoying themselves so happily and unrestrainedly. They lived now, instead of merely existing. It quite delighted Dr. Green to witness their intense pleasure, they were so simple and unsophisticated in their tastes, so naïve and fresh in their ideas, so free and frank in their enjoyments. Everything appeared so home-like and happy to them, and they were made so much of, so wondrously much. Martha and her handmaiden Sarah had strict orders to do all in their power to render the visit an agreeable one. If in the beginning Dr. Green had fears as to whether his quiet, unostentatious home would be sufficient for them, whether they would be dull and the time hang heavily on their hands, such doubts were quickly dispelled. A more joyous, contented disposition than Norman's never existed. Ever bright and merry, his presence was continual sunshine; and Muriel, quieter and more undemonstrative, asked nothing better than to always be with him. Where he was was happiness; away from him it was dull and chill. They both became dearer and dearer to the brusque yet kindly doctor. It was a totally new experience to him to have children in his house, voices ringing through it, and laughter echoing through the silent rooms. He was obliged to be away from them a great deal—his practice was large, and his assistant was taking a holiday—but whenever he came back, which he did ever as soon as he could, there were

two bright smiling faces ready to welcome him. It was surprising, old bachelor as he was, how eagerly and boyishly he entered into all their ideas, how keen was his appreciation of the truth and candour they displayed, and how heartily he entered into every little joke. Great was the number of little things he purchased for them; indeed, it began to be quite an understood fact that if he was anywhere near a town he brought them back something. Nothing that he deemed suitable did he consider too costly, and if ever he was in a difficulty as to what might be acceptable, he always selected a book. Thus before they had been at Cherry Cottage many days they had sufficient reading to last them for nearly a year. One present each he bought them which must be particularly mentioned, and which he begged them always to keep. Norman's was a ring, a somewhat strange present for a boy, and Muriel's a locket. Both were intended to be worn by people in mourning, being plain gold in black, and in each was a small lock of silky hair, which it puzzled them much as to whom it belonged. It could not be the doctor's; his was coarse iron grey, whilst this was brown. When questioned about it Dr. Green would never satisfy their curiosity, though years afterwards Mr. Duerdon told Muriel it was a piece of their mother's. On the ring, in black letters, was the word "Mizpah," and on Muriel's "In memory of ——." It was the first

piece of jewellery they either of them yet possessed, though there were a few treasures belonging to their mother which Mrs. Duerdon was taking care of for them. Muriel, girl-like, was very proud of her locket. Norman, on the contrary, was rather ashamed of wearing a ring. He wished heartily it had been a watch, for it was a great ambition of his to get one, but he was too kind-hearted and good, too refined, to say so.

The days passed quickly, far too quickly, for them all; and if the days were bright, what were the evenings, the cheerful happy evenings, the homely doctor's presence, no lessons, and all enjoyment? After tea was cleared away games commenced. Chess, draughts, Nap., and Newmarket were great favourites, and they managed to have great fun. Sometimes a few friends were invited, Ernest Mervin and Miss Bradshaw being amongst the most favoured. It would have gladdened any one's heart to witness the quiet mirth that went on in that small house. Alas! that such bright times should pass away so quickly! Would that they could have lasted for ever; but eternal sunshine in this world cannot be. Day and night, summer and winter must each have their turn, though lives, like years, are not alike. In some there is much more summer than in others.

Martha, who had been for many years in Dr. Green's service, thought there was no such gentleman anywhere as he. "The sun only shone on

him," in her estimation, and whatever he wished it delighted her to perform. Seeing what care and thought he bestowed on the Vivians, she strove her best to please them too. It was not many whom she would have welcomed in her kitchen or allowed to ramble at will over the house. This privilege she vouchsafed to Muriel.

"Make 'em at home everywhere, Sarah," she said, much to that young damsel's amazement. "The master wishes it; his heart is rarely set on them. I can tell by that twinkle in his eye, when he is talking to 'em. Master Norman's a fine young gent for sure, but miss is too shy and too pale for my liking."

Both Martha and Sarah rejoiced in two red faces, full-blown and rosy.

Muriel was constantly in the kitchen. At fisrt she went with diffidence, but gained more courage as she found herself well received. She watched the cooking with the greatest interest, whilst Norman, who had to rest his foot for a certain number of hours daily, went on with his reading. What mysteries were unfolded to Muriel in the comfortable little kitchen at Cherry Cottage; the kitchen at Astley Park, with its numerous domestics about in all directions, was a tabooed place to her, so that everything in the culinary department was new. And what a cosy clean place Martha made of her kitchen. The floor washed and sanded, and the large hearthrug in front of the fire, on

which pussy purred and slept undisturbed, however busy Martha might be. The brass pans shining away against the clean walls, and the shelves covered with pretty crockery and glasses. Then Martha's tables and dressers would bear comparison with any, they were as white as driven snow. The length of one side of the wall was taken up with a large window, which looked into the back garden, and made the kitchen light and pleasant. Whenever Muriel entered with "May I come in, Martha," she was always made welcome. A large white apron was first put on, one of either Martha's or Sarah's, and then she was enlisted in the service, much to her delight. She beat eggs, chopped suet, washed currants, stoned raisins, weighed flour, and cut up lemon peel, or whatever was required, perfectly convinced there never was any art more delightful than cooking, or any person more clever at it than Martha Durrant. Norman quite agreed with Muriel in this belief, as indeed he did in any other. He declared that there never had been such splendid cakes, jellies, or custards ever made before, as she made, or such famous puff pastry.

Time went on, however. It will not stop for any one's pleasure. Owen was better, Norman's ankle quite well, and there was positively no longer any excuse why the Vivians should not return home. The pleasant visit must end; it had already extended to nearly three weeks. Dr. Green was

fully as sorry as the Vivians were; half an excuse, or the smallest vestige of one would have been quite sufficient for him to have delayed the separation to an indefinite period, could it have been managed. But he was too thoroughly honest and conscientious to concoct an entirely untrue tale. Had not Mr. Duerdon trusted him so implicitly, and relied on his word so strongly, it is possible he might under the circumstances have been a little deceitful. But he could not betray trust; it would be too bad a thing. If there had been no school work to demand their attention, Dr. Green would have gone straight to the Duerdons and insisted in his brusque way that the children should be left in his care.

"That abominable school work, of which there is far too much done in these degenerate days, claims your attention," declared the doctor, "or I would have kept you here *nolens volens*."

"You dare not," put in Muriel; "Mrs. Duerdon would have made you give us up. Oh, dear! how different it will be at Astley Park again; this is much more like home." And Muriel sighed.

"Mrs. Duerdon," repeated the doctor; "bah, that for her," and he snapped his finger. "You do not think a parcel of old women could frighten me, eh!"

Muriel's eyes grew large in admiration of the doctor's nerve.

"Mrs. Duerdon would have come and demanded

us," laughed Norman, "and you would have been so impressed with her great dignity, that you would have bowed, and said, 'Madam, it shall be as you wish.'"

"Or else he would have given us up willingly," put in Muriel, "saying, 'Here are the Vivians; I've found them a great nuisance; take them at once. They were a frightful responsibility.'"

"You young rogues," exclaimed Dr. Green with delight, though a tear rolled down his rugged face, "you young Turks. Ah! So you have been a frightful responsibility. You've suggested a good idea to me. Off you must go; the house will be well rid of you both. My little quiet Murry, too, with her nice tea cakes. Dear me, children, how you have grown into the solitary old man's heart. How dull the place will be. Wait until next holidays, though; what fun we will have then!"

Two very large tears filled Muriel's eyes, and slowly trickled down each cheek. She quickly wiped them away. Norman, with his bright smile, never faltered; they had had a pleasant visit, but he was ready again for work. It somewhat broke the bitterness of parting to all, the prospect of a future visit thus held out. But there was not a dry eye when they left; they might have been going miles away.

Dr. Green hurried off to the surgery to hide his emotion, feebly muttering he was wanted, in such a low tone that no one heard him. Coming acci-

dentally against his retriever Carlo, an immense favourite generally speaking, he gave that animal, greatly to its astonishment, a kick which sent him howling away.

Even John, Dr. Green's factotum, manservant, gardener, coachman and groom all in one, unwillingly harnessed the horse to drive them home.

"I'd noan a done it," he confessed to Martha in his quaint old-fashioned way, "but that master wished it special. 'We must do 'em all the honour we can, John,' master remarked to me. 'They've plenty of carriages at their place, but it would not be respect to let 'em be fetched.' Them was just master's words, and happen if I'd not a done it young master and missie might a thought me unkind; but I'm noan so willing to let 'em go."

"You've no call to grieve, John," replied Martha sturdily, "what is it to you as sees 'em once in a day. It's us to mind, the master and Sairey and me, but we mun make the best of it. Master is rarely upset hisself; let not you and me make matters worse. That young Master Norman, with his pretty smile and pleasant ways, is my pride. Miss Muriel's very well, but she's noan to compare with him. He'd win the heart of a—the heart of —bless me, what should I say?"

"He'd win your heart, Martha," rejoined John, "and that's not what every one can do."

"He'd gain the heart of a elephant," announced Martha with emphasis, unheeding John's little

interruption. And with this unblushing announcement Martha walked back to the kitchen, wiping one eye with the corner of her apron.

There she came upon Sarah, who was weeping loudly.

"Heart alive," ejaculated Martha with fervour, "what ever are you a setting up this shout and shindy for; what is to do girl?"

"Oh, they're gone, they're gone," sobbed the girl.

"Goodness me! and is that all?" asked Martha in well-assumed amazement. "Sairey, child, I thought your mother was dead; I did for sure. Dry your eyes, and give over this din. Do you want to make the master more upset nor he is? For shame, girl; get to your work, and adone with that outlandish noise."

Thus firmly rebuked, Sarah wiped her eyes, emphatically declaring that the place was more like a mopish dungeon with all old people in it, than a house; and, for her part, she did not think she could settle again with all the brightness gone out of it.

"Pack up and go then, girl," replied practical Martha; "but if you'll take an older advice than your own, don't go for to give up a good place for a mere whim."

And the Vivians' departure truly made a great change. Quietness and desolation reigned for a time in the rooms their youthful cheerfulness had brightened. Dr. Green felt it at meals especially.

"Martha, I wish we had our two little friends back," he observed whilst she waited on him at dinner. "It's very quiet and dull without them."

"Well now, sir, do you," answered Martha, taking a glass off the sideboard, and holding it up to the light to see it was clean. "Do you, sir; well, it's a pity we cannot feel alike. I'm not so young as I were, master, and it comes as a bit of relief the quiet does to me."

"Tut, tut," said the doctor, quite deceived by Martha's manner. "You're a hard-hearted woman to be pleased to get rid of those bonny children. I wish I could have them always."

"Save us, sir," exclaimed Martha, though to herself she added, "Aye, so do I. If there's more work there's more life. My old heart feels queer and heavy, but I must not tell him; no, I munnot do that."

At six o'clock that evening or thereabouts, Dr. Green called at Astley Park, according to a promise he had given Norman at parting.

The nursery tea was going on. It was fortunate it was so, for Mrs. Duerdon had told Muriel to keep out of the doctor's way, as she felt quite sure he had been bothered enough with her for some time to come.

"Perhaps, Muriel, in your forwardness you presume to think you are cared for; dispossess yourself of that notion. You are too plain and too disagreeable to be liked."

Thus cruelly Mrs. Duerdon tried to crush the open candour just beginning to bud, which, sown in Dr. Green's kind, jovial home, might have flourished and expanded from blossom into fruit under an open genial influence.

Chilled, disappointed, thrown back on herself, Muriel bid fair to return to her old ways.

Norman did not hear this speech, and Muriel, in her fear of wounding him, did not repeat it. He was always hurt by any disparaging remarks being cast at his sister. She pondered it over thoughtfully, and wondered why it was she was so very unlovable.

When Dr. Green entered the nursery all life and energy, she did not, as was her wont, jump up eagerly to welcome him. A change had come over her already; she sat constrained and still, leaving Norman and Owen to do the honours of greeting. But Dr. Green was not to be so repulsed. He was luckily not over-sensitive, and he had his own surmises as to what had effected the change.

"Is there no welcome from my little woman?" queried he kindly. "What have I done to be so quickly forgotten?"

Muriel got up quietly smiling, and held out her hand.

"Hands will not do for me," said the doctor brusquely. "I have not called professionally, and do not wish to feel your pulse. Old men do not like being snubbed, eh Owen. No, I must have a kiss all round."

Owen sprang on his knee, and Muriel put up her face, which the doctor fondly kissed.

"Dear girl," he said, "Millicent's child."

Muriel was pleased.

"You do like me dear Dr. Green, do you not?" she whispered timidly.

"Like you, child," reiterated the doctor with vehemence, "of course I like you. I thought I had given sufficient proof of it in my home. Why, Muriel, I like you and your brother better than any one else in the world. I once loved your mamma, and therefore I cannot but love the children she died and left."

"Did you not like papa too?"

"My dear I did not know him. I have heard he was very nice."

"Thank you very much," replied Muriel, strangely comforted.

"No thanks required. The Vivians are the best youngsters in the world," declared the doctor jocosely. "May they ever keep as good."

"Owen good too," chirped the child. "Owen like Dr. Green."

"Ah, Owen's a regular good boy," agreed the doctor; and to himself he added, "likely to be with such examples before him as Norman and Muriel set."

The cloud quite cleared off Muriel's face; her doubts were swept away before the doctor left.

Norman got up to open the door for their good

friend; he would have gone downstairs but the doctor would not hear of it.

"Good-night," said Norman cheerfully, and, then, in spite of his fourteen years and a boy's natural distaste to kissing, he put his two hands on the doctor's shoulder, and saluted him heartily.

It was a mute testimony of gratitude. He could not help the flush that dyed his face crimson, for he was only a boy, and a sensitive refined boy too, but he was not ashamed of what he had done. No; on the contrary he was proud of it. Why should he be ashamed to kiss the kind old friend who had done so much to render both Muriel and himself happy.

Norman had done right, and he was pleased, no matter how he blushed.

Dr. Green looked proudly at the noble boyish face.

"God bless you, Norman," he said with emotion. "You are not too proud to kiss the old furrowed face of a friend. You have fine moral courage my lad; keep it, and as long as you want a good word come to me; you'll know where to find me. I do not know another boy of my acquaintance that dare kiss any one openly for fear of being laughed at. Bah, a lot of calves. Good-night. I can find my way downstairs."

"Grand nature, noble winning lad; so gracious in his manners even to a dull old codger like me," soliloquized the medical man. "That boy will

win a name for himself in the future, or my name's not Geoffry Green. The shy retiring girl too. Bless them both; there's not another pair to equal them in Great Britain. I believe I'm growing silly over them."

He paused at the bottom of the stairs, and held a short colloquy with himself as to whether he could go home without seeing the Duerdons. The result was he knocked at the dining-room door.

Mr. Duerdon responded "Come in."

He entered, and found that gentleman sitting alone, reading.

"Where's madam?" he asked, after shaking hands.

"Dressing for dinner, I believe. But, doctor, wherever have you dropped from?"

"From your nursery last," replied the other quaintly. "It's all right; there's been no want of proper respect. Norman offered to do the polite, but I said I could find my way about, as I have done you see."

"Stay and take a quiet dinner with us," solicited Mr. Duerdon. "My wife and I get tired of these *têtes-à-têtes*. We visit pretty much, as I daresay you are aware, in consequence."

"Can't stay—far too busy. Have a few words to say, to which I should have liked Mrs. Duerdon to hear. Women like to be consulted in matters, so I am told, though thank goodness I cannot speak from experience."

"Nothing about Owen I trust," said Mr. Duerdon anxiously.

"Owen, bosh! Owen's right enough. It is Norman I wish to say a few words about."

"Norman!" reiterated Mr. Duerdon in surprise. "What's wrong with him?"

"Who said a word about his being wrong, man? How you jump to conclusions," blurted Dr. Green. "The boy's not exactly strong. He is growing quickly, and I have been surprised at one or two little symptoms that showed themselves when he sprained his ankle. Nothing particular—things that you might pass by unnoticed, but which were plainly perceptible to an experienced eye such as mine. These highly sensitive natures have never the strongest constitutions."

"What are you driving at, Green? Is there some new cause for fear? You are making me anxious, I confess."

"There is nothing to be exactly anxious about, but there is evil to be averted. I only suggest care and attention. The walk to Jycliffe every day is too great a strain on his constitution combined with the amount of study he has to go through."

"Just what I've always said," declared Mr. Duerdon promptly. "I never wanted the boy to walk, but wished to place him as a boarder with the second master. I thought, though, you were a great advocate for walking."

"So I am, a most earnest advocate for it, and

for every kind of exercise in moderation, but the amount taken must not be beyond the powers of the constitution. What would brace and strengthen one boy up would, as you are doubtless aware, kill another."

"What would you suggest then—that Norman should be placed as a boarder at Jycliffe? Give the word and it shall be done."

"On no account," replied Dr. Green heartily; "that would never do. You would separate the brother and sister by that plan, and they are bound up in each other. No, man alive, get him a pony."

Mr. Duerdon gave a sigh of relief.

"Is that all?" he said; "he shall have one at once. Yet, doctor, there are many boys less delicately reared than Norman who walk there and back every day unless Sunday; they never suffer, yet the food they get is often poor."

"Less delicately reared," replied the kindly man; "there you have the secret. Norman has not the requisite stamina. Get him a pony; you will never repent it. In the meantime let him be driven; his ankle is not yet strong."

"It shall be attended to; thanks for the suggestion. There is their mother's money, you know. I did not wish it to be touched until Muriel comes of age unless it is requisite."

"Don't touch it then," said Dr. Green bluntly. "You are rich enough in all conscience. Leave

them that intact; it will have increased nicely in all these years."

Shortly after he took leave.

"I have managed that little affair nicely," he commented. "The lad is delicate, and it was a necessary attention. I could not send him away altogether; there was Muriel to be considered. No, I think I have done the best."

That same evening later on Mr. Duerdon told his wife of Dr. Green's proposition. He expected opposition—a hundred objections to be overruled and mastered—numerous objections to overcome. And he was prepared to do it. Greatly to his surprise they were not raised. Mrs. Duerdon had learnt caution, and she was a woman of tact. She did not mean to be nonplussed again. One victory lost must count for many battles gained. She would not show her true character, but like a true general, play and fence, but not until the right moment attack. She had not the slightest intention that Norman should have any animal of his own, were it even a donkey, but she did not mean to aver so openly. For a short time she would let the pony phaeton go in quietly; then gradually break it off.

Mr. Duerdon was quite deceived by these tactics. In open warfare he would have gained the day, so strongly was he impressed of the necessity, but in sly manœuvring he was nowhere. He thought everything was settled as far as his wife

was concerned, and felt pleased that the matter had met with her consent. How little he knew! On Monday morning the little phaeton drove up for Norman. Mrs. Duerdon had told him on Sunday night to wait for it, that for the present he would be spared the walk, and he in boyish delight and gratitude thanked her over and over again for her thoughtfulness. It was not that he minded the walk, but he appreciated the kindness. Mr. Duerdon asked Muriel if she would like to accompany her brother, and she was almost more overwhelmed than Norman had been. She faltered out some thanks which Mr. Duerdon contrived to understand. He told her to wrap up well, and that as long as Norman drove she might go in the phaeton, provided the weather was fine enough to permit of it. Muriel was back always in time for Miss Bradshaw, who came at ten, so that Mrs. Duerdon had no plausible excuse.

"For a few weeks," she said to herself, "this state of things may go on; after that we must draw the reins, or these Vivians will override everything."

It might have lessened Muriel's pure enjoyment of these drives had she heard this speech, but luckily she did not, and went on her way rejoicing, and the village people, seeing the two bright faces flushed and animated, chatting away and talking fast, drive through morning and evening, publicly declared there never were two more favoured chil-

dren than "them there Vivians." In the morning, when Muriel left Norman, and again in the afternoon when she fetched him, Douglas was, by Mr. Duerdon's orders, teaching her to drive. Norman drove at other times, and Muriel often said she learnt as much from watching him as in having the reins in her own hand.

One afternoon when they reached the large school gates, no one appeared in answer to Douglas's loud knock. They waited for a few minutes, but all was still.

"I think school must be over, miss, for the afternoon," said Douglas presently. "Perhaps they have gone to the playground. Should I get out and enquire?"

"Are we late, Douglas?"

"No, miss; it's ten minutes to five. They're let out sooner to-day—a half-holiday may be—or else they're uncommon quiet and in disgrace."

"I will go and see," declared Muriel; "I know the way, and I dare not stay in the carriage; the pony might run away."

"No fear of that, Miss Muriel; he's too fat and lazy. He would stand here for a month."

The man smiled, but his tone was perfectly respectful.

Muriel deliberated. She did not know which to do. She did not like going to the school door, and meeting perhaps a hundred faces; neither on the other hand did she care to take the reins during Douglas's absence. The man meant what he said

she knew, but still she was timid. Of two evils she chose the least; she jumped out of the phaeton, preferring to look for Norman herself. Once find him and there was safety, even from the glances of ten times one hundred boys. Muriel passed slowly through the school gates, which Douglas got out and held open for her. She walked round to the door of the school. Over it in large stone letters was "Jycliffe Grammar School, Anno Domini 1550." She could scarcely read it, the dusk was coming on so quickly. She knocked at once, but no one came, and then she began to think Douglas must be right—school was over.

For one instant Muriel paused, listening for the busy hum of many voices inside ; all was still, and her heart sank at the profound stillness. It oppressed her. She could just see the playground walls, for where she stood they were not so very far off; surely she ought to hear voices. She walked on timidly. Muriel was always nervous, but many a stouter heart than hers might have quaked at entering a large grammar school playground.

As she neared it after turning a corner she passed under a low archway, and then she perceived a number of boys standing about in groups, not playing, but talking earnestly in low tones. They were evidently holding council on something private.

"How decidedly awkward," cogitated Muriel.

"I wonder which group Norman can be in. I wish it was a little lighter; perhaps he may catch sight of me. I certainly cannot recognise any one in this light."

She stood still for a couple of minutes; it seemed to her quite five, but they were all too engrossed to notice her. Then she saw a boy coming towards her. She looked eagerly, but at the first glance she perceived it was not Norman, neither was it Ernest Mervin, whom just now she would have welcomed almost equally with her brother, so lonely and timid did she feel.

"Never mind; perhaps this boy can help me," thought Muriel. "I will let him come near."

"If you please can you tell me where my brother Norman is?" she asked nervously. "I have come to take him home, but cannot find him anywhere."

The boy glanced at her and bowed, so she thought all was right. She knew nothing of boys' pranks.

"Here, Smith, Measures, Robinson, and a whole lot of you, come here," he shouted out to the group he had just left. "This young lady is inquiring for a Miss Norman. She has come to take her home."

A loud titter greeted this question.

"Don't know such a name," exclaimed one.

"Where does she hail from?" demanded another.

"Vivian—Norman Vivian," interrupted Muriel shyly.

She could not bear all these boys to make fun of her.

"Did you speak, madam?" interrogated another lad, taking off his hat in mock respect. "Boys, here's a lark, young ladies intruding on our playground. What will old Ritchie say? Won't he be in no end of a funk?"

"For shame of you all," exclaimed a tall, gentlemanly youth, darting forward out of the group. "How can you be so rude to a young lady?" Then he turned to Muriel. "Pardon our manners, or rather our want of them," he said politely. "Who did you say you wanted?"

Muriel, with a suspicious catching of her breath which made the youth think she was going to cry, pronounced her brother's name. He was mistaken in his supposition; Muriel, though nervous, was not weak.

"Norman Vivian," she repeated again.

"Vivian. Oh, I know him well, so do the others; he's a lower sixth boy. If you wait here one minute I will find him."

Norman was very surprised to find Muriel standing on his playground, and well he might be. It was her first and last visit there.

"I did not know it was so late, Murry," he apologized. "We were having an interesting discussion as to what present we should make one of the

head masters. I must have got lost in argument, for I fully intended running every few minutes to see if the phaeton was coming. Old Edwards, who minds the gate, has gone home. We were let out half an hour earlier to-day, and these boys," pointing to the groups, "are principally boarders. This is Alan Murray, Sis, one of our nicest boys."

Muriel held her hand out timidly to the young, gentlemanly fellow who had so politely come to her rescue. He took it at once, and smiled at her.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Vivian," he said, speaking pleasantly. "Norman has often spoken of his sister Muriel. You are she, I presume."

"Oh, yes; has he?" asked Muriel in delight, "and he has also mentioned Alan Murray to me. Thank you very much for your aid."

"It was a mere nothing," smiled Alan, taking off his hat and leaving them.

"What a nice boy," exclaimed Muriel.

Norman drew Muriel's hand through his arm.

"I am so glad you have come, Sis," he said. "Do you know, I have got so lazy, I do not think I could have walked."

"Yet, Norman, you used to do so twice a day four weeks ago. Do you remember the time when all that white snow covered the earth like a shroud? How lovely it looked."

"Well do I remember it," assented Norman, jumping in the phaeton. "Here, Muriel, let me wrap this rug well round you. How are your feet, eh? Starved, I should fear, with waiting for me. There now, is not that warm and snug? Daylight is going quickly and early to-day I fancy. Now let's be off."

"That was a very pleasant boy, Norman," said Muriel, returning to the charge, "the boy who came and told you I was there. Where does he come from?"

"From Stonecourt, a place eight or nine miles the other side of Astley. His father is a very wealthy man, and many people wonder at him letting Alan come to a school of this sort. But it's his mother's doing they say. He is an only son, and she fancies he is delicate. He goes home every Saturday until Monday."

"Is he delicate, Nor?"

Norman laughed.

"I do not think so; he looks the picture of health. He is an extremely nice boy, with good abilities. He is always gentlemanly and pleasant."

"When I asked for you, Nor, none of the boys knew whom I meant. How was it? Surely they know your name."

"For whom did you ask, Sis?"

"For you of course, Nor. I said, 'Do you know where Norman is, please?' or something to that effect."

"Ah," replied her brother laughing, "you puzzled them. Boys always go by their surnames; it is usual everywhere I believe. Had you asked for Vivian it would have been all right. It was lucky Murray saw you, for ours are not at all a polished lot of boys. They pride themselves rather on their want of manners. You see," he added apologetically, "they are not much in ladies' society."

"I shall not venture there again," exclaimed Muriel with vehemence. And she kept her word; she never did go again.

The next afternoon turned out wet. Muriel was sorry because it deprived her of her drive into Jycliffe. There was one comfort; Norman would be home much earlier than he used to be formerly.

Muriel was in the drawing-room helping to amuse Owen when he came. He held his hand over one eye.

"Is anything the matter with your eye?" questioned Muriel at once.

He took his hand away, and she perceived it was black and swollen.

"Oh, what is it?" cried Muriel in alarm. "What have you done, and how?"

Norman glanced at Mrs. Duerdon, who was, as usual, lying on the sofa.

"Have you fallen down and hurt yourself, dear?" she inquired hastily. "Do say."

Mrs. Duerdon looked up, an unpleasant smile on her face.

"What, Norman the perfect, have you fallen? Is it possible that you, the infallible boy of Astley, have come home with a blackened eye?" she asked sarcastically.

Norman did not like her tone.

"I have not had a fall," he replied in his straightforward way. "No, Mrs. Duerdon, I have been fighting. I did not wish to tell you, but as you have questioned me I am forced to speak out."

"Horrible boy," uttered Mrs. Duerdon in assumed affright. "What will you do next?"

And she held her hands up as if the sight were too dreadful to meet her eye.

"Oh, I am not in the least ashamed," declared Norman openly. "It was in a good cause. I would do it over again if the same thing occurred."

"I do not doubt it," said Mrs. Duerdon. "I can quite credit your fighting propensities. But as prize-fighters do not usually frequent drawing-rooms, I beg of you to withdraw upstairs. Get your eye bathed, and make yourself generally presentable."

"I do not know what you mean by your allusion to prize-fighters," retorted Norman, holding up his head proudly. "If your friends happen to be connected with them mine are fortunately not."

And for once Norman lost his remarkable sweetness of temper.

"To whom are you speaking in that tone?" inquired Mr. Duerdon, meeting him at the door.

"To Mrs. Duerdon," answered Norman frankly. "If she expects politeness she must also show it."

Mrs. Duerdon's eyes perfectly blazed with fury.

"That is a specimen of one of your pieces of perfection," she shrieked with excitement.

Muriel shivered with fear.

"Come back and apologise for such bad behaviour," said Mr. Duerdon sternly. "How came you to forget yourself so strangely?"

"I did not forget myself, Uncle Fred," said the boy, holding himself up. "It is Mrs. Duerdon's place to apologise to me. I certainly shall not do so to her."

At this juncture Mrs. Duerdon, who could not hold herself entirely free from blame, languidly interrupted.

"Let him go, Fred, and don't make such a fuss. I called him a young prize-fighter, or something like it, and he chose to resent the insult. Silly young cub."

"He must always pay respect to his elders," remarked Mr. Duerdon, and the conversation dropped.

Muriel breathed freely again. She had been sadly afraid Norman would have got into disgrace, and that would have been worse than anything. She felt infinitely thankful at his escape.

"May I go upstairs?" she ventured to ask, after a short time.

"Certainly not," answered Mrs. Duerdon crossly. "What a selfish child you are. Whom do you suppose is to amuse Owen?"

"Perhaps Muriel thought I should have my usual game at horses, Clara," remarked Mr. Duerdon pleasantly.

"Owen wants to go and kiss Norman's bad eye well. Owen vewy sowy Ma cross with Norman, vewy sowy."

"You can both go then," signified Mrs. Duerdon fretfully. "Owen is growing as bad as the other two, just as rebellious; there is continual bother with him. It is another annoyance that results from bringing up other people's children. I expect he will copy Norman in everything."

"I sincerely trust he may," broke from her husband with fervour. "He could not copy a better style. It is the earnest wish of my heart that Owen may grow up as noble a character."

"Are your eyes not opened yet, blind man?" queried Mrs. Duerdon. "Spare me an enumeration of his fine qualities, perfect, blameless, sweet-tempered, and—oh dear, let us descant on some less threadbare topic."

"He is decidedly not perfect," dissented her husband, "far from blameless; yet see with all his boyish failings how open and upright he is. See how he battles with his faults. Witness his little ebullition of temper just now, such a rare

exhibition that it quite surprised me. I do not believe in all the years he has lived here I ever saw him put out before."

"Oh, but have not I, Fred? It is of frequent occurrence. He is not what you suppose; he imposes on you."

"Does he, my dear? I scarcely think so. I know the boy's character pretty well. He will repent his hasty words ere long I feel sure. However, Clara, if the subject is not agreeable, let us change it."

CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Duerdon was right in his surmise respecting Norman's repentance. A few minutes before the thundering of the gong announced dinner, a gentle tap came at the drawing-room door and Norman walked in. He walked straight up to Mrs. Duerdon. Muriel had bathed his eye and Nurse Spence with more efficient fingers had tied one of Mr. Duerdon's white silk handkerchiefs round it but though it might be a desirable protection it certainly was neither an ornament nor an improvement. Norman did not think of this but in his frank open way said,

"Forgive me for my hasty temper just now, I cannot feel happy until I have confessed my fault."

A self satisfied complacent smile crossed Mrs. Duerdon's face as she listened to the boy's apology. She lifted a book from her knee and put it on the table ere she answered. "I thought you would come to your senses soon, if left to yourself. I am glad you own yourself in fault, it is comforting to think I am not always in error, and that it is possible for you to err sometimes."

The bright look faded from Norman's eyes. "Yes I was very wrong," he repeated "but I do not think dear Mrs. Duerdon you quite understand me," and

he stopped abruptly. "I hardly know how to express myself, I am in a slight dilemma," he said. "Forgive me if I put it too plainly—I think you were in error in as far as you called me a prize-fighter or implied it, which was perfectly unjustifiable, you gave the cause of offence, but I was very wrong, very wicked in fact, to get angry over it; please say you will forget it."

A frown gathered on Mrs. Duerdon's face. "Distinctions without any difference I do not understand,' she said. "If a fault is a fault call it by it's right name—if it is not one why allude to it at all?"

Norman took Mrs. Duerdon's hand.

"You must grant me forgiveness," he said with his most winning smile. "I cannot let you off."

Silence ensued.

"I cannot let you off."

"Clara dear," remonstrated her husband.

"Well," uttered impatiently.

"You must give a free and full pardon to my young kinsman and set his heart at rest; do I beg of you."

"How I wish you would not interfere in everything," grumbled Mrs. Duerdon. "Leave the matter to Norman and myself, what a fuss is made in this house over nothing. I do not care to be troubled with such trifles; remember this for the future."

There are some people who cannot receive an

apology properly. It seems thrown away upon them, their natures are too mean. Mrs. Duerdon was one of this kind. Norman who loved to be at peace with the whole world felt disappointed. He left the room only half satisfied. He had done what was right, surely he ought to feel happy, yet somehow he did not. He was very sensitive and only a full forgiveness could satisfy him.

Muriel saw all was not right when he returned to the schoolroom, his face was so clouded, but directly his eye met hers the shade passed off and smile of exceeding sweetness shone instead. He was his own bright self again and they both set to with a good will to prepare their morrow's lessons.

A couple of hours had passed and Mrs. Duerdon sat in the drawing-room alone. Every luxury that money could buy lay scattered around in careless profusion. No sound broke the stillness save the faint ticking of a handsome timepiece. Time rolled on and it gently suggested the fact, being too well bred to make such an assertion loudly. She sat in silence—her face resting on her hands and gazing thoughtfully in the fire. It was not an attitude she often affected for it implied deep thought and deep thought and Mrs. Duerdon did not agree. Mr. Duerdon came in the room—she slightly started but did not look up.

"What must I give you for your thoughts," he inquired gaily, "is the proverbial well-known penny sufficient."

"My thoughts were not worth much," answered Mrs. Duerdon quietly. "I was just wondering how much longer Norman would require the phaeton to go to school."

"Well Clara that was not worth spending any anxious thoughts on surely—with all our horses and carriages at your disposal you need not perplex yourself about that. The-dog cart is equally convenient for Major, and it is quite at your disposal."

"Really Fred, as if I should ask Major to go in a common dog-cart, I would not insult her so."

"She will never do badly if she has always something as good as a dog-cart to go in," said Mr. Duerdon in a significant tone "many people greatly her superiors are glad to drive in that way."

Mrs. Duerdon made no answer, perhaps she could not.

"You do not want the phaeton for your own use Clara I presume?"

"Certainly not, I should never go in it if I always stayed at home—but I think Norman has had the use of it long enough—he will begin to claim it as a right."

"He will not require it much longer Clara. Douglas has been looking about everywhere for a pony. To-day he has heard of a beauty which from his account I fancy will suit. It is to come over to-morrow on approbation."

"How very absurd," declared Mrs. Duerdon

crossly "as if we have not plenty animals in the stables already eating their heads off."

"We have a good number certainly," agreed her husband good-humouredly "but not one that will suit."

"I cannot see why Norman does not walk," said Mrs. Duerdon persistently "he never used to complain."

"Neither my dear would he now—it is not to oblige him that I am buying the pony —but Dr. Green has strongly advised such a course being pursued."

"You and Dr. Green are a couple of simpletons over Norman, Fred! if you do not ruin him it will not be for want of trying, and if you persist in letting him ride, why not let him have the phaeton pony once in a way—it used to be ridden, why it is not good enough is a mystery to me."

Mr. Duerdon laughed good-naturedly. "As well send him on a donkey Clara. Fancy any one riding on that old fat lazy thing. I should not envy them whoever it was—walking would be a hundred times preferable."

"Let him walk then, it would do him good."

"No Clara, decidedly not in defiance of our medical man's advice. I wish to do right by the children and there is not the slightest reason why he should not ride. I am well able to afford him one pony or two even if he required it."

"You are always very extravagant," retorted

Mrs. Duerdon "why buy another pony when the old fat one could be reduced to order. Let him be worked more and fed less and he will do well enough."

"Why Clara if you do not take care you will be taken up for cruelty to animals—cruelty in a mitigated form if there is a society for such a purpose. How would it be dear to get up an interest on the subject—what an occupation it would prove."

Mrs. Duerdon turned up her nose in extreme disgust. An interruption came; coffee was handed round, and for a time the subject dropped. Not for long however, Mrs. Duerdon wanted the question set at rest and to her satisfaction too. She began again. Coaxingly this time—this was Mrs. Duerdon under a new aspect, and a rather dangerous aspect too.

"Fred dear you will give up this foolish scheme of yours to please me—now will you not, do give me your promise?"

Mr. Duerdon lifted his eyebrows—"In what way foolish Clara? Dr. Green has, as I keep saying recommended riding, independently of that I do not like the boy to walk, it is not seemly to say the least. Mervin has a pony, why not Norman? One more or less in our stables will never be felt, we seem to be going over the ground again."

"I beg to differ from you Fred, every fresh animal takes more food."

"Every additional animal I presume you mean," corrected Mr. Duerdon. "Yes, well taking it in that

literal way you are right. I tell you what we will do Clara, we will let the old lazy pony go, it has a fearful appetite."

"By all means Fred lessen our expenses and not increase them. You seem to think nothing of money spent on Norman or Muriel's behalf. There is food, education, clothing, pocket money and now you"—

"Stop, stop Clara, in fair justice stop," interrupted her husband gravely. "You have got on the wrong tack altogether now—they cost us literally nothing, their maintenance is a mere cipher, though I suppose it will from this time increase steadily. As for pocket money do not let us allude to it, I verily believe they have none."

"There you are mistaken, they have three pence a week regularly."

Mr. Duerdon smiled.

"That is not enough, Clara, for children in their position, at their age too."

"It's as much as they have required, all their wants being supplied," maintained Mrs. Duerdon, stoutly.

"It is probably, my dear, what we may have thought enough, not knowing the numberless little purchases children like to make. The Vivians are both self-denying and unselfish, and never ask for what is not given to them. Many young people at their age have a pretty good allowance. I think I shall give them a certain sum every month."

"Oh, yes, make them extravagant members of

society; spoil them, ruin their self-dependence, and you will be satisfied."

"Not so bad as that, Clara, they shall not have sufficient to render them spendthrifts, but enough to spare them from falling into the pitfall of meanness. Besides, dear, you quite forget they have their mother's money."

Mrs. Duerdon stirred her coffee quickly. "Their mother's money," she repeated ironically. "A mere nothing, a paltry hundred or so a year—a bare pittance—not enough to clothe Owen. And how much of their mother's money do you spend on them?" she asked, significantly leaning forward, and looking into Mr. Duerdon's face; "will it suit you to tell me that?"

"My business, Clara, altogether. In money matters I keep my own counsel. Let us change our topic of conversation, we do not seem likely to agree."

"In a minute or two, Fred, when you have satisfied me on one or two points. Once more, is it your intention to purchase Norman a pony?"

"That is my fixed intention."

Mrs. Duerdon's foot began to tap the carpet impatiently.

"Is it your intention also to give a large sum for the animal?"

"What do you call a large sum? I shall certainly buy something pretty presentable, an animal worthy of the boy's acceptance, and one

that will not disgrace me as its donor; it will make a suitable birthday present for him."

Mrs. Duerdon drew in her breath, things were going sadly wrong.

"Whose money do you intend spending?" she asked eagerly.

Her husband raised his eyebrows. "Did I understand you aright, Clara," he inquired. "Did you ask whose money I should spend."

"Yes, that is just the question I did ask. I speak plainly—whose money is it?"

"My own, of course; whose else should I spend?" asked her husband in amazement.

"It is false," came from her closed teeth. "You are robbing Owen, and you know it. Spending what is his and wronging him. I will not allow it."

"Robbing—Owen—and I—know it!" repeated Mr. Duerdon, in bewilderment. "What do you mean, Clara?" asked Mr. Duerdon, hotly. "I cannot catch your meaning. The money is mine, mine to do what I like with, and as long as I live I shall spend it in any manner that suits me best. I neither rob nor wrong my own dear little boy."

Then cooling down, and anxious ever to conciliate his wife, he said, "I will tell you what we will do, and how it can be arranged. The pony shall be a present from Owen, that will settle all our difficulties. What say you, will that plan do?"

"Decidedly not," burst from Mrs. Duerdon, in a fury. "Norman shall neither have the pony from

you nor from Owen. What do you mean by making such a commotion over the pauper boy? It is quite abominable. He wants punishing besides for his insolence to me this evening; are you going to forget that? I will take care he does not escape."

"Why, Clara," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon, almost breathless from astonishment, "you surely do not mean what you say? Norman expressed his contrition. I thought you had freely forgiven him; though by the way you did not"—

"Did not say so, no, and do not intend to do. It has lately become the fashion to flatter and make much of the Vivians. I decline to be in the fashion, not wishing them to be utterly ruined. We will waste no more words. Norman shall walk to school as heretofore, and"—

"Norman shall not walk," burst from Mr. Duerdon, quite angrily.

"He shall, I say," shrieked his wife, "am I never to have my own way."

"Not this time," declared her husband, sternly. "I will go in the dining-room and read my paper whilst you—you compose yourself."

Mr. Duerdon walked off, feeling himself master of the situation. He was in blissful ignorance of the wiles and plots by which it is possible to be ensnared.

"Oh, don't, Fred, don't leave me," pleaded Mrs. Duerdon, bursting into tears—a woman's last resource—and crying piteously. "How can you

be so hard-hearted, so very unfeeling? What shall I do if you turn against me?" She was using her last weapon of warfare, if it should fail she was conquered. She knew this, and determined now to strive her best. "Let the animal be given to Norman, Fred, if you love him better than you do me. Anything for peace only it—it shows—what you think—of me," and she sobbed aloud.

Mr. Duerdon, kind-hearted man, had a great horror of tears, they melted him as quickly as tea melts sugar. He was quite deceived now, and began inwardly to call himself names, hard, cruel names. He had been too hard, too uncompromising, and he felt it.

"Hush, Clara, love, hush," he said tenderly, "it shall be as you wish, only give over crying, dear."

"Will you—will you buy—something for—for Owen—to—to ride on?" she sobbed. "Something nice—but not—as—expensive as the one—Douglas—heard of?"

"It shall be as you suggest," sighed Mr. Duerdon, wearily, "only be happy again, dear Clara. I do not like grieving you."

Mrs. Duerdon dried her eyes slowly, and her sobs ceased suspiciously soon. And kind-hearted, unsuspecting, weak Mr. Duerdon, little dreamt how cleverly he had been duped. He felt as if he had been very hard-hearted, and he wondered if the world had not turned upside down—there was

something wrong somewhere. It was his last attempt for mastery. Never again did he strive to better the condition of the Vivians in any substantial way. Privately he might be kind, or in any little thing that did not run counter with his wife's wishes he might make an effort, but never more did he seriously oppose her. Alas ! alas ! that he had only striven for a few minutes longer —that he had insisted on his way, it being the right one. It would have been better for all parties.

CHAPTER X.

The next morning was a bright clear frost, the ground was white, the air sharp and bracing. Norman's spirits, always naturally high, were almost boundless as the fat pony trotted quietly along. And Muriel, whose moods were ever influenced by her brother, became quite lively. Both children were in blissful ignorance of the *fracas* which had taken place the evening before, and in which they were, one of them more especially, the cause. As yet they were unaware even that the subject of a pony for Norman's own particular acceptance had been mooted.

Dr. Green, in his high gig, driving quickly, met the little phaeton on its way to Jycliffe. He had been very busy the last week. The fever had been bad, though now, owing to the frost returning, it was rapidly disappearing. He had not seen his two little friends at all lately, and was consequently ready for a chat. He reined in his horse, when to his utter surprise and astonishment Norman drove by.

"Hallo, there, stop!" he shouted. "What do you mean by such cruel desertion and behaviour? Can you not recognise an old friend when you see

him? You young rogues I'll have you arrested, see if I don't."

Norman had not wished to stop, but thus abruptly brought to bay, he could not without being rude do otherwise. The doctor's quick searching glance took the whole case in immediately.

"Ah, young man, so you have been doing something to your eye, have you, and did not wish the sharp old doctor to know. What the dickens have you been doing, eh? running against a marble mantelpiece or a lamp-post, trying to find out which was the hardest?"

Norman laughed. "It is very much swollen," he answered, taking off his silk handkerchief.

"Umph!" said the doctor, "it is black and disfigured, but don't cuddle it up in that thing, man alive. Only a bruise, the air will do it good, and bathe it in arnica when you get home. You have not told me yet how you got it."

"That's easily told," said the boy. "I have been fighting, and Briggs left his mark on me."

"He never gave you the worst, Norman?" asked the doctor, implied reproach in his tone.

"He is a great deal bigger than Norman," put in Muriel, quickly, "and he had set on a little boy and was beating him unfairly, so Norman, though he was afraid, attacked Briggs."

"Oh, Muriel, I was not afraid of Briggs, he is a big bully," asserted Norman.

"I hope you gave it to him, Norman, my boy,"

said the doctor, in great excitement; "doubled up your fist in fine style, and rushed at him dauntlessly. Did you leave him a couple of black eyes and a swollen nose?"

"He looked bad," declared Norman, "and he cried out for mercy. He'll be stiff I'll be bound to-day."

"The great soft," cried Dr. Green, "he was just like all cowards are. Your eye, my boy, is neither useful nor ornamental, but at the same time never be afraid of another. By the way, if you are going to strain it at school you had better tie that thing round it again."

"It's all right," quietly responded Norman, "I will attend to what you say."

"You'd better, you'd better," roared Dr. Green. "And now about that pony of yours, Norman, has it not come yet?"

"What pony of mine?" laughed the boy, thinking Dr. Green was joking. "I have no pony."

"Have you not heard Mr. Duerdon is going to buy you one?"

Norman shook his head in incredulity, and Muriel smiled. They both knew their old friend's propensity.

"Honour bright," said the doctor, gravely, "it's no joke this time, I mean what I say—Mr. Duerdon is going to buy Norman a pony."

He asserted it strongly, and Muriel's face brightened. "I believe you, dear Dr. Green," ex-

claimed Muriel. "How delightful, Norman! it is the best, the very best news we could have heard."

"Not so good as if one had come for yourself, Muriel?" interrogated the doctor, knitting his shaggy eyebrows.

"A thousand, thousand times better; what do I want with a pony, and it will be so useful to Norman. Nor, are you not glad?"

"Glad!" he repeated, "I feel wild with joy. It's glorious news. Hold me, some one, or I shall jump out of the pony carriage."

"No fear of harming yourself if you do take a mad jump," replied the doctor, coolly. "Muriel, you must have something nice, what shall it be? Do not be afraid to say."

Muriel only shook her head. "I will find out and let you know," spoke up Norman. "I have a shilling to put to it which a friend of papa's gave me long ago."

"All right," called out Dr. Green, driving off.

Now, was it not an unfortunate thing that the pony should have been mentioned to the Vivians. Dr. Green, in his honest, blundering way, never meant to do any harm; on the contrary, he wished to give pleasure. Norman was in the seventh heaven of delight at the splendid news. He never doubted for one moment the veracity of the statement when openly assured it was correct and not a joke.

"Is not Uncle Fred a regular brick, Muriel?"

questioned he. "I will go in for the exhibition at school, and try and please him, he's always so kind. When I am a man won't I repay all his goodness?"

"Yes, that we will, and treat him like a king. But, Norman, I do not see how we could possibly invite him without Mrs. Duerdon, do you?" Her voice took a lower tone; this was the dark side of the picture.

"Oh, easily enough; madam would not care to come and see us, we should not be grand enough for her. It would not be worth the trouble only to stay with those two poor Vivians. You need never be afraid she would confer that honour, Muriel."

The two children had a laugh over this little witticism, Douglas even joined in, but he changed it into a cough when he saw Norman looking at him.

"She only cares for parties and society, and good things," remarked Muriel presently, "and we should not go in for very much visiting, should we? and there would be no one to see all her dress."

"Do not trouble your head," answered Norman, gaily, "madam 'll never come. Ah, here we are! I verily believe the bell is gone, and I am late. Good-bye, Sis. Mind, Douglas, you bring the new pony for me this evening."

Douglas touched his cap respectfully. "Very well, sir." Douglas felt in his own mind that he

would be bringing it without any doubt, but as Norman did not know it was coming he supposed his master intended it for a pleasant surprise. So he would not tell. Douglas was only a groom, but he was a good servant, he knew his duty and his place too well to betray any confidence placed in him, although the temptation to let Muriel know was great, as he sat silently by her side. Muriel was quite satisfied with the news Dr. Green had imparted ; she never thought of questioning Douglas, though that would only have been a very natural course to have pursued. She was shortly to learn more. As the clock struck ten Miss Bradshaw entered the old-fashioned schoolroom, the same room in which you have seen Norman and Muriel before, and the very one also in which their mother many years ago had studied with her step-mother, though they knew it not. Muriel, for a wonder, was inattentive with her lessons ; as a rule she was persevering, and gave but little trouble, but this morning she could think of nothing but Norman's pony. Miss Bradshaw, a tall, dark lady with ringlets in the front of her head, and a little knob at the back, sat near very quiet and very patient. She made great allowance for Muriel's mood ; it happened so rarely she gave trouble that Miss Bradshaw felt sure there was some good cause for it. At first she pretended not to notice the inattention, and at the same time strove by greater assiduity on her own part to drive all carelessness

away. But at last some flagrant and glaring error called so strongly for reproof, that she could not let it go unchecked. Muriel at once threw down her book in deep contrition. "How wilfully thoughtless I must seem to you this morning," she observed, "and how patient you have been Dickie"—her favourite name for her governess. "How unweariedly patient and kind. I am quite ashamed of my inattention. It is all because I am thinking of Norman, I verily believe; the idea of it will keep ringing in my head."

"I do not see, my dear child, why you should let your thoughts dwell more on Norman to-day than usual," reproved the governess.

"Oh, but Dickie, that's because you do not know. You have not heard about his new pony. Oh, look, do look, Dickie, there it is."

She jumped up excitedly, and went to the large bay window at the extreme end of the room overlooking the croquet lawn, and beyond that the large stables with the clock over the middle doors as large as a church clock. A strange man was leading a beautiful pony to the house. Douglas walked by his side.

"Oh! Miss Bradshaw, do come and look!" pleaded Muriel, "I believe that splendid creature is for Norman. Dr. Green said one was coming. Is it not good and kind of Mr. Duerdon? I feel as if I could never thank him enough."

"Mrs. Duerdon too, I presume, Muriel?"

Muriel did not heed the interruption, perhaps she never heard it.

"When we grow up, and Norman is a clergyman, and we live in our own beautiful little home, where we can do as we like, and everybody loves us"—

"Where is that desirable home to be?" asked Miss Bradshaw with a smile. "Love is not so easy to gain in this world, my child."

"Well, they will all love Norman, I am sure, for no one could help it, could they Dickie?"

"Not very well," assented Miss Bradshaw; "he has a very lovable nature. But perhaps, Muriel, we are a little partial—"

Muriel shook her head.

"No," she said, "every one must love Norman; and when we keep house, Dickie, we intend to ask Mr. Duerdon to come and spend weeks with us. Will it not be delightful?"

Miss Bradshaw smiled. She would not sadden the hopeful young spirit. She had reached the window, and stood by Muriel. Her walk was a slow one, and she limped slightly, but perceptibly.

Muriel took her hand and pressed it—a demonstrative action that spoke volumes from undemonstrative Muriel.

"Oh! look, Miss Bradshaw! they have at last taken the pony round the front of the house, and we cannot see it from here. Please, Dickie, let me run to my room and have a peep. I will not stay so very long."

Deeply sympathising with Muriel's excitement and keenly participating in it, Miss Bradshaw granted the desired permission. Some governesses might have feared to have provoked Mrs. Duerdon's anger had the relaxed authority, the freedom from lessons, been reported to her. Miss Bradshaw was afraid of no one, she always strove to do what was right, and thus knew not fear.

One moment and Muriel was back, a perplexed look on her face.

"I cannot understand it at all," she said, speaking slowly.

The man walked the pony up and down once or twice, but no one came out.

"Can Mr. Duerdon be away from home, I wonder? Ah, there they are again, coming back," and Muriel flew to the window, very nearly under which the two men and the animal now passed.

Without pausing for thought, and acting on the impulse of the moment, the excited girl threw open the heavy window. She put her head out, and shouted—

"Douglas, is that Master Norman's pony?"

Douglas shook his head.

"No, Miss; it will not do."

"Surely that is nice enough," thought Muriel. "Mr. Duerdon does mean to have a good one."

She shut the window with a bang, and returned to her place at the table, determined to try and give her attention to her lessons until the conclusion of school hours.

A gentle tap, and Mrs. Duerdon entered the room.

"Excuse my interrupting lessons," she said, addressing Miss Bradshaw; "I wish to speak to you on business for a few minutes."

Her manner was condescendingly gracious, as it could be when she chose. It was a great act of politeness her coming to the schoolroom instead of sending for Miss Bradshaw to wait on her in her boudoir as was her usual custom. But the governess did not seem to notice it. She remained quiet, calm, and respectful. Mrs. Duerdon had always behaved fairly well in all her intercourse with Miss Bradshaw, and the governess in return thought people unjust in their judgment of the mistress of Astley Park.

Muriel, remembering past offences, placed a seat for Mrs. Duerdon, but Miss Bradshaw, who occupied the only comfortable chair in the room—the old faded, easy chair—got up, and, motioning to Mrs. Duerdon to sit in it, limped to the one Muriel had placed.

"My business is private," signified Mrs. Duerdon.

"Muriel dear," said Miss Bradshaw gently, "you may go. Come back in a few minutes and collect your books. Lessons are over for to-day."

Muriel walked away slowly, she did not care to be thus summarily dismissed. Before she reached the door she paused.

"May I ask one question, Mrs. Duerdon?" she said. "Is that Norman's pony, that beautiful creature which has just gone round?"

"Norman's pony!" haughtily responded that lady; "I was not aware that Norman had a pony. Pray where did he get it?"

"We were told Mr. Duerdon was going to buy him one."

Mrs. Duerdon laughed unpleasantly, a little grating laugh.

"Your informant, whoever it was, must have purposely misled you. Mr. Duerdon has something better to do with his money than to waste it on you two, and you have no other friend. There is some talk of Owen's having an animal of some sort to ride, but that, as you will allow, is a totally different affair."

A hot retort was on Muriel's lips, the crimson flush dyed her cheeks, but a glance from Miss Bradshaw—a glance full of kindness and sympathy—checked her. She left the room, merely remarking—

"The dear doctor would not wilfully have misled us;" and to herself she added, "I do not believe one single word of what she said; she only did it to try me."

For one minute she paused outside the schoolroom door as to where she should go. Then down the stairs, across the hall, out through the front door, straight by the croquet lawn, round to the

stables flew Muriel. Could Mrs. Duerdon only have seen her now, could she have seen her, what would have been her feelings? Sitting so comfortably in the schoolroom, had she but have glanced out of the large bay window what would have been the consequences? Her thoughts would have been greatly disturbed to have caught sight of a young girl running wild and hatless, scampering off in defiance of all proprieties, the very girl whom she was straining every nerve to crush to an automaton—the one whom she was striving to train into a decorous piece of parchment, stiff and ungainly, without beauty of any kind.

In support of her character, in deference to all the laws she had laid down, Mrs. Duerdon must have fainted, and Muriel would have been kept in durance vile a week or more to lament misdeeds and shortcomings, which in another would have been pronounced high spirits. Luckily the catastrophe did not happen. Mrs. Duerdon kept her eyes fixed on the faded and well-worn carpet, vainly endeavouring, it might be, to trace a pattern thereon. Every now and then she raised them in assumed deprecation as if to meekly assert her meaning, and thus Muriel went unmolested.

"Douglas, Douglas, where are you?" shouted Muriel.

A stableman appeared.

"He ain't been here, Miss, for a long time, leastways not for about five minutes."

"Oh, dear," sighed the girl regretfully, "what shall I do? William, do you know if—if—do you know if there are two ponies expected?"

"Two ponies," repeated the man, scratching his head as if puzzled. "Can't say as there is, Miss; Douglas said he was expecting one to-day."

"And do you know who that one is for?" questioned Muriel eagerly.

"For Master Norman, at least so I heard Douglas say."

"That's all right," almost sang Muriel in her joy, "dear old Nor will not be disappointed."

She went flying back.

"How relieved I do feel to be sure; I hardly knew whether *she* was in earnest or not; I really feared she was, she spoke so proudly. But then she is worse to me than to any one else—she delights to annoy me. I wish I was nicer, so that she could like me better. Heigho! Never mind, Norman is going to have a pony."

Upstairs ran Muriel, making straight for the schoolroom. Full of joy and heedless she almost ran full tilt against Mrs. Duerdon, who was coming out of the door. It was only avoided by that lady drawing hurriedly back.

"Ah, Muriel, listening, were you," she said. "Cleverly caught, my dear; it's a very deceitful action. Do not do it again."

"I was not listening," retorted Muriel angrily. "I would not do such a mean shabby thing."

"Appearances were sadly against you," laughed Mrs. Duerdon provokingly.

Muriel felt too indignant to listen to another word. She took hold of the schoolroom door and went in.

Mrs. Duerdon proceeded on her way well satisfied. She had been making arrangements with Miss Bradshaw to teach Owen for an hour daily. At first Miss Bradshaw had demurred; her afternoons were fully occupied, and if she undertook another pupil it would take her only spare hour from her, but at last she gave way. It was finally arranged that Muriel was to commence at nine instead of ten, and leave off an hour earlier than she used. This hour from twelve to one was to be Owen's; it was the best part of the day for him, and his studies would be necessarily very light at first.

Mrs. Duerdon thought she had several reasons to congratulate herself on the success of her plan.

"I have managed famously," she commented exultingly. "Miss Bradshaw comes an hour earlier, and receives no more pay. Owen for a time will be educated for nothing, and besides this I shall have Muriel under my thumb; she cannot under any pretext whatever drive with Norman to school in the mornings, she will be

wanted here. My young gentleman won't have the pony carriage long, another week or so, but she shall not accompany him any more."

Why she wished to put stop to a proceeding that was such a treat to both, and which they each enjoyed with unalloyed pleasure, she alone knew. It could not surely be that she grudged them every happiness.

Later on Mrs. Duerdon confided to her husband how cleverly she had arranged with Miss Bradshaw.

"I have taken her in nicely," she declared in triumph.

"Poor Miss Bradshaw!" uttered Mr. Duerdon compassionately; "a thorough gentlewoman, but a poor one. Money is a great object to her, Clara."

"So it is to us all," snapped Mrs. Duerdon. "Do not make yourself a simpleton about her, Fred, and offer to pay ever so much more than you need."

"You are very polite," remarked Mr. Duerdon coolly.

He said no more, he wanted no more scenes. But it may as well be mentioned here that he arranged privately with Miss Bradshaw. As long as she stayed at Astley she was no loser by the extra hour's tuition. A cheque was sent to her half-yearly by Mr. Duerdon's directions. He considered he was only doing right to pay any lady

well who was honoured by having charge of his son.

Norman returned home in as good spirits as he had started in the morning; his excitement had not in any way abated. He looked upon it as one of his red-letter days, and all through his lessons rang the glad thought, "I am going to have a pony." His heart literally sang for joy. There was no drawing-room that evening before the nursery tea. It was one of the nights on which the Duerdons dined from home. These dinner parties came pretty frequently, but no one regretted them. The hour spent in the drawing-room was looked upon as penance hour. It had been originally instituted for Owen's benefit, and was the only hour in the day in which he saw his mamma, as he was too young at present to join the family at luncheon.

Mrs. Duerdon never visited the nursery, or entered into his little amusements as Mr. Duerdon did. She left the care and entire responsibility of him to Spence.

The drawing-room hour had not at first turned out successfully, Owen invariably varied the monotony by a good fit of crying.

One evening Muriel happened to come in to deliver a message, and one of Owen's paroxysms occurred. She went up to him and managed to quell the torrents of tears immediately. Mrs. Duerdon intimated that for the future she and

Norman were to come and make themselves useful. They of course obeyed; night after night, unless when a dinner party interfered, the programme at Astley Park was always the same.

"Where are the Duerdons going to-night?" inquired Norman, unlacing his boots and putting a pair of slippers on.

Muriel shook her head. She did not know.

"I fancy, Master Norman," replied Nurse Spence, "they are going to the Fieldings; Major told me so this morning."

Nurse lifted up her head from the stocking she was darning as she spoke.

"Major will know," responded Norman laconically.

The nursery looked very comfortable; it was a cheerful room. A lamp burnt brightly on a small round table, and Spence's work was on it. Owen was in the middle of the floor playing at ninepins, and Muriel was helping him. The door opened, and Mr. Duerdon entered.

"Back early, Norman," observed he pleasantly. "Douglas must have made the fat pony trot this afternoon."

"He brought the dog-cart, Uncle Fred. I suppose, Muriel, that was the reason you did not come?"

Muriel was going to speak, but Mr. Duerdon interrupted her.

"Ah!" he said, "the pony and phaeton will

have a rest for a time. I bought a pony for riding this afternoon."

"This afternoon," thought Muriel; "not this morning."

Norman made no answer; the time had not yet come, and he would have been unable to speak even had he wanted; his heart was beating almost to suffocation. He was going to hear good news, such bright good news. How his heart did beat to be sure.

Muriel noted his agitation.

"Is it a pretty pony, Mr. Duerdon?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing out of the way, Muriel, but sufficient for what we require."

This was rather a damper, and filled Muriel's mind with wonder.

"Why, the one I saw this morning was a beauty, a real beauty," she declared eagerly. "I never saw anything like the proud way it carried its head. Douglas brought it round."

"I did not purchase that animal," disclaimed Mr. Duerdon quietly. "The man wanted too large a price—a preposterous price my wife thought it; nearly enough for a horse; so I bought a nice quiet little creature for Owen. I gave much less for it, and let Sultan go—beautiful Sultan."

"For Owen!" gasped Muriel in bewilderment.

Norman was speechless; he turned white to his

very lips. The blow was great; he was only a boy, with all a boy's hopes and longings in him, and this was the first inkling remember he had received that the present was for Owen instead of for himself. The disappointment was very bitter to one of his sensitive temperament, but he was a brave boy, and keenly as he regretted his loss, he forced a smile on his face. He was not going to let a little trouble unman him.

"It will be nice for you, Owen dear," he said, laying his hand on one of Owen's shoulders. "I will teach you to ride."

"And ride it yourself also every day for the present, Norman, until the weather gets much milder," said Mr. Duerdon. "I would rather you did."

"Thanks. I think I can manage to walk again all right," declared Norman lightly. "I have had a nice long rest, and my ankle seems quite strong."

The thought of borrowing Owen's pony pricked pride. He could bear that another should have that which he had fondly believed was to have been his; but that he should have to be indebted to that other for the loan of it, wounded him.

Owen had been a silent listener to the whole conversation. He ran to Norman.

"Me not want a pony," lisped he; "me frightened; let it be yours, Norman. Owen wide when he gets big boy. Please, papa, let it be for Norman."

Norman lifted the little fellow up, and kissed him. The child's speech soothed his disappointment.

"Good Owen," he said pleasantly, "you are a lucky boy to have a kind papa to buy you nice presents; and you quite deserve it. You must let Norman ride sometimes."

But if Norman had thus bravely and manfully fought the battle which raged inwardly over his destroyed hopes, Muriel was not so valiant. That Norman's expectations had been raised so high only to be dashed down, was more than she could bear. She quite lost herself in commiserating Norman.

"It's a great shame, and I do not consider it at all right," she said angrily, stamping her foot on the ground, "that Owen, who is such a little boy, should have the pony, whilst Norman, who is big, and has a long walk daily, should be without it. There is neither justice nor fairness in such proceedings. I am sure if papa and mamma could look down they would both be displeased."

"Justice and fairness need not be mentioned in connection with this affair," said Mr. Duerdon quietly. "Owen is my son. Besides," he added in an afterthought, "Norman sees the thing in its right light."

"Norman must be frightfully disappointed I know," responded Muriel sharply; "but he is so good he always takes troubles in the right light,

and that is what hurts me. If he blustered and complained as I do he would forget quicker. Besides, why did Dr. Green tell us that Norman was the one that you were going to give the pony to? it is too bad."

"Hush, darling," whispered Norman gently, "it is quite right. I was foolish to expect such an expensive present. Think of dear little Owen, too!"

"Dr. Green told you," reiterated Mr. Duerdon, "what made him do that? Well, Muriel, that is the only excuse I can make for your outburst. I am exceedingly sorry that your brother should be disappointed, but for private reasons of my own I have acted in the way that calls for your displeasure. You must try always to believe that I do or try to do the best for all parties."

It surprised Mr. Duerdon greatly to find the children were aware of his original intention to make Norman a present of a pony; it was one more difficulty to be overcome. It grieved him that he should have to let this disappointment fall on them, but he could not alter it. There was no way in which to mitigate it unless by another great commotion, and for that he was not prepared. *Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*, for after all children's troubles were not like grown people's; they passed quickly away.

These thoughts flew rapidly through Mr. Duerdon's mind.

At that instant Major appeared at the nursery door.

"My mistress desired me to tell you, sir, that the carriage has been waiting some minutes."

Mr. Duerdon kissed Owen; then he turned to Norman.

"I am sorry for your disappointment, my boy," he remarked, "but it will not matter much to whom the pony belongs if you both ride it."

Owen looked up.

"Let it be Norman's, papa."

"Certainly my dear, if you prefer to call it so. I do not mind whose it is called, only be happy together."

He left the room.

"What sophistry," uttered Muriel in disgust. "If the horrid animal is Owen's call it Owen's; if it is yours, call it yours. Why need we hesitate about such absurdity."

Norman nodded assent, and smiled.

"Dear little fellow," he exclaimed; "what a generous little pet he is! I might learn a lesson from him. Just think, Muriel, how willing he was to give up his glorious present. Of course it makes no difference; I should never take it from him."

"I do not see much magnanimity in his offer," differed Muriel. "He gave you something he neither needed nor wanted."

"All boys like to have a pony; a real live animal of their own," declared Norman. "Owen's behaviour has been splendid."

"And so has some one else's," remarked Muriel sturdily.

Then she threw her arms round Norman's neck.

"What a shame it all is," she exclaimed resentfully. "I wish I had money, I would soon buy you another. You should not be treated so; why even Owen sees it is wrong."

"Oh! I am all right, dear Sis. Mr. Duerdon has some hidden motive which we must respect, though we cannot fathom it," said Norman loyally. "Do not think about it any more. Let us try and be thankful for all we have, and not grieve over what we cannot get."

"You are right, dear Nor" exclaimed Muriel in loving appreciation of her brother's character. "Right, as you always are."

"Madam would not endorse that sentiment," laughed Norman. "What a brick Owen is. I must have a game with him. You will join, Murry? Say what shall it be."

In a few minutes a grand romp was going on; all three trying, as Nurse said, who could make the most noise and dust.

If in the solitude of his chamber that night, when on his knees making known to our good Father above his daily trials, Norman, boy-like, grieved for the loss of a treasure that he had thought was to have been his, who could blame him? Do we not all likewise?

CHAPTER XI.

Some days passed quietly. Norman rode Owen's pony several times, in accordance with Mr. Duerdon's expressed wishes. So far all was well, but both Muriel and Norman knew this state of things could not last. The spring weather was coming, the bright days, when all nature rejoices, and Owen would be taken out and taught to ride, and the pony would be kept for his use exclusively. Already was Mrs. Duerdon complaining that Norman had grown very idle. She could not understand any young boy of his age finding four miles a day too much, especially a boy who had his way to make in the world as Norman had. This future prospect, which served for many a threat, and which she held over his head as a dangling beam, had no terrors for him. He always laughed good-humouredly whenever Mrs. Duerdon made it.

"I am truly glad that I have my way to make in the world," he would say cheerfully. "You shall see what a bright way it will be," and the young head would be held up proudly and dauntlessly.

The noble boy was conscious of his inward powers both to do and to be. It was this inward conviction of capabilities, far beyond the average,

which kept him from falling into careless habits, that ever held guard over any propensity for giving way to idleness. His natural amiability and sweetness of disposition might have led him into weakness or indolence of character, if it had not been counterbalanced by this knowledge, which instead gave him a stability of purpose, a steadfastness of design that promised to be of great service, and rendered him able to cope with the different trials by which he was surrounded.

The days lengthened gradually. The light stayed long enough to get tea by without the lamp.

Norman was never overtaken by the dusk on his homeward journey, even when he walked. Sometimes Muriel got permission to go and meet him, and this permission she hailed with delight. One afternoon she was late in starting, but she did not mind, for she learned from Douglas that the pony had gone for him. She never cared to go far when Norman rode, as she considered she shortened his pleasure. He always walked his pony by her side directly they met, instead of galloping along. Several times he had tried to persuade her to have a short canter, but she was timid, and preferred walking. So when she started late, instead of hurrying as she would have done in the old walking days, she dawdled over one thing and another until she thought she would have but a short way beyond the village to go.

She was correct in her surmises; she met him about half a mile from the lodge gates. He looked pale and wearied, but his face brightened considerably at sight of her.

"What an unexpected pleasure, Murry dear," said Norman, raising his hat in mock politeness. "It is nice. I scarcely thought you would have got off to-night."

"Owen is out driving in the close carriage with his mamma," replied Muriel, patting the pony's neck; "she left word with Spence that I might come. She said my services would not be required. I considered it unusual consideration on her part."

"Ah, I suppose so. Oh! look, look, Murry; Mr. Green is beckoning to us with all his might. Look at him, there."

They were passing down the little village street. Muriel looked to the best of her ability up and down the street, here, there, and she would have said everywhere, but in vain; she failed to detect him.

"Where are your eyes, Murry?" asked Norman, in astonishment. "Look, he is standing at his own door." And there truly was the good doctor shaking his fist at them most vigorously.

"You two young rogues! you truants! you double-dyed impostors! why have you never given me a call? Have you forgotten me, and Martha, and John, and all? Here have we been expect-

ing you to tea every day for nobody knows how long—all kinds of good things prepared for you—and you never turn up. Cool desertion! base ingratitude! There has Norman been, with all the pride imaginable, riding that new treasure of his backwards and forwards to and fro and forgetting his lonely old friend, and Muriel turning her face away in every direction but the most likely one, trying to avoid meeting a reproving glance aiding and abetting him. They've got as proud as Lucifer over that pony—an ugly thing, too, by the way; nothing to be proud of. Bah! Come in children; never cut your true old friend. Come along."

"Pony and all?" laughed Norman.

"John shall take it round to the stable, and give it a feed, whilst I bring you both in here and serve you ditto," said the doctor, in high glee, rubbing his hands together.

He was completely happy now he had his children again.

"I should think we may stay," deliberated Muriel, thoughtfully.

"Stay, why not? I am not an ogre to gobble you up. Of course you can stay. Bless my life, what will you wonder next?"

Norman went up to Dr. Green, and laid his hand lovingly on his shoulder. He understood the gruff manner that tried to hide the kindly heart.

"We shall be delighted to spend one of your

pleasant evenings here with you, dear friend, but Mrs. Duerdon is rather particular on these points. Will you send word?"

"Aye, I will send word enough," grunted the doctor, "and as it will be very heavy to carry, John had better take that frightfully ugly animal of yours back at the same time."

The message went according to Norman's request, but word came back that they were to go home at once. Some friends were dining there, and they would be wanted in the drawing-room after dessert.

"Wants you at once, does she? Then I am sorry to say she won't get you," said Dr. Green, rubbing his hands excitedly together. "Not one step do you stir from this house until all these good things are cleared."

"Simply impossible," declared Norman, springing up. "You would make us ill, doctor. We have both done credit to your generosity already."

"Well, I suppose I must let you go, or Lady Duerdon might vent some slight sarcasm on your heads. I start you on one condition, and that is you come to-morrow night and finish these sweets. Mind you do not disappoint me," said the kindly doctor, wringing their hands warmly.

They went the next night, but not without many demurs from Mrs. Duerdon. She did not approve of so much pleasure and visiting. It was, perhaps, only natural she should object to

her own little boy being left solitary and quiet whilst Muriel and Norman enjoyed themselves; but Owen was not old enough to visit, and she could scarcely hope to keep the Vivians always at home. She did not care for them to make friends out of the house. Perhaps she doubted their loyalty, but she need not have done. They were leal and staunch. It was different at their own dinner parties; she wished them to be seen then. People might remark on their absence were they kept in the background. Her conduct might be condemned, or at any rate criticised, and this Mrs. Duerdon shrank from, so she generally introduced them into the drawing-room either before dinner or after dessert. Owen was always taken in to dessert, but this Muriel positively declined to do, and had one of her obstinate fits over it. She had an insuperable objection to be shown off, and would rather undergo any punishment than be, as she expressed it, "such a baby." Norman greatly preferred staying out, but with greater amiability and fewer prejudices he went in to oblige Owen once or twice.

The Vivians always dreaded these party evenings. How different to the homely enjoyable ones spent at the doctor's. They could not help contrasting the difference when they went to Cherry Cottage the second night. Such a welcome as they got instead of the prim, stiff decorum of the drawing-room party at Astley Park. There was

the doctor, his strong, rugged features, plain and solid, literally beaming with delight, fussing and fuming, and brimming over with delight. Such a hearty kiss as he gave them both, such a pressure of the hands.

"There, you young rebels, bless you! go and speak to Martha and Sarah in the kitchen; they are all anxiety waiting for you, I'll be bound, and here am I in my selfishness forgetting them. Off with you; and, Norman, if this new possession of yours has not made you too proud, give them a friendly shake of the hands. Muriel won't, I guess. There, go along."

Out they both rushed to see their faithful though humble friends. John stood grinning behind Martha. He had no business in the kitchen in the daytime, but he wanted to see "the children," and had made some excuse. Martha and Sarah, generally voluble and loquacious, stood silent also, too delighted to find words to express their happiness. They grinned their red faces polished and shiny. Norman grasped Martha's hand heartily, and Muriel spoke to John. In a few minutes all shyness had worn off; they were all at home together.

After a short conversation the Vivians hurried back to their good friend, who was rushing about excitedly awaiting their return. Martha prepared her wondrous tea. Sarah might have been excused if she had complained of fatigue in carry-

ing so many good things in. The table literally groaned under its weight; but was it not, as she expressed it in her vernacular, "for them there blessed Viveurns, and a body could never do enough for them in her mind; no, not if they worked for days and nights. No, nor not for never."

The only fault the evening possessed was its shortness. It was gone almost ere it had commenced, and the children found it difficult to believe that the hours did not really fly quicker at Cherry Cottage than at Astley Park.

"It's a pity you may not stay a while longer," remarked Dr. Green, as he buttoned up his coat preparatory to a walk home with them. "A canter on your little cob would be pleasant such a night as this, eh?"

He had one on either side of him, each holding his arm.

"Ah, would it not?" assented Norman, cheerfully; "that is if I had one, which, by the way, doctor, I have not, in spite of your joking me so about it."

"Bless my life!" exclaimed the honest man, aghast; "do you mean what you say?"

"I do, honestly and sincerely; the pony is Owen's. What made you think that I ever could have one?"

"Mr. Duerdon's own word and promise. And it really is not yours, and you have allowed me to tease and twit you all the evening about your

pride and conceit in owning such a treasure. Why, boy, I would not have been so unkind for worlds. I would not have done it for a good deal, only I was so pleased at your ownership. What a heartless old soul you must have thought me. Tut, tut, bless my life! And whose did you say the creature is?"

"Owen's."

The doctor started as if shot.

"Owen's," he repeated; "does he ride it?"

"Not yet, but he is going to do as soon as the weather gets warmer. I shall give it up then."

The doctor's hand came down heavily on Norman's shoulder. They were standing in the middle of the road, the moon shining full on their faces. "And why was it, Norman, you never informed me that the animal was not yours. You knew I expected you were going to have one, and how interested I should be about it. Now tell me, lad. Do not fancy for a minute I grudge Owen his possession, but I want you to be similarly favoured. How was it he got a pony and you did not? Did you refuse it? Now tell me."

Norman lifted his face, with its deep, clear eyes honest and truthful, to the doctor.

"It never struck me you would mind whose it was," he said. "Moreover, to tell the truth, I did not care to speak about the affair."

"Let's walk on," said the doctor, resuming his old place.

He was much upset, but he did not care to show it.

"There was such a beauty came on approval," put in Muriel. "It had an arching neck, and held its head so proudly; it pawed the ground prettily, and seemed very spirited. Douglas says they wanted more than thirty guineas for it, and Mr. Duerdon declared it was too much."

"Too much decidedly," agreed the doctor, with emphasis. "Those fellows think a man's made of money. Where was it from?"

"That I did not inquire. It was called Sultan."

"Never mind what they call it, so long as it comes when we call it," rejoined the doctor, jocosely.

"It will not do that," said Muriel, soberly; "we shall not call it, and even if we did, it has gone too far to hear us."

"Umph, umph," exclaimed Dr. Green, irritably, "so you think."

"Will you come in?" inquired Norman. They had reached the large house standing out dark and grim in the long shadows cast by the moonlight. "Mr. Duerdon will be pleased to see you."

"Not to-night, not to-night," declined the doctor quickly. "Good-night, my bairns. Go in straight. God bless you both."

He walked speedily away, muttering to himself, "Poor lad, he's placed in an awkward position;

and not to tell me. Ah, Millicent, you'd better have put them both with me. I was not so rich, perhaps, but I'd have loved them more; aye, that I would. Now I cannot do much, but what little I can do shall be done. What a noble lad he is! A true son of a sweet mother. Just think of him not telling me,—his old friend—me!"

CHAPTER XII.

When the doctor reached the lodge gate, instead of taking the road to his own house, he branched off in a contrary direction, and made for the Vicarage. He soon reached it. Very pretty it looked, its large shrubs and trees lighted by the moonlight; it was almost as bright as day. The Vicarage was not a large house, not large, that is, when compared with Mr. Duerdon's mansion, but it was a good-sized moderate family abode. It had the appearance of two houses joined together, one half standing considerably farther back than the other. This, the old part, was covered with ivy. The front portion was newer; it had not been up more than fourteen years, having been built when Ernest, the youngest, was a baby. The garden was dotted about with flower beds, and covered with soft velvety grass, green as grass proverbially is. The drive wound round it in the most wonderful style to the front door. From the large iron gate to the house was no distance, but by drive it was marvellous how far it became. It is the fashion nowadays for every one to have a lengthy drive; if there is not one, it must be made.

Good Mr. Mervin had never troubled his head

about such things, but the architect had for him, and the result was the same. A road was cut out in the shape of a bow, thus making the gravel drive of some importance. The house and garden stood high, and the grass sloped down gradually at each end. Up this slope ran the doctor, cutting across the garden straight to the house. Not one of the fashionable callers was he who preferred going round.

"Is your master in?" inquired he of the maid who answered the door.

"Yes, sir; please to walk in," replied the girl, with a smile.

She was sister to Sarah at Dr. Green's, and he was consequently a favourite of hers.

The doctor wiped his feet on the mat, hung his coat on a peg, and prepared to follow the servant to the dining-room. Ere they reached it another door opened, and Mr. Mervin peeped cautiously out.

"Caught, vicar, fairly caught," laughed the doctor, clapping his hands; "you did not think you would be seen."

Mr. Mervin was an elderly man, tall and thin, with a slight stoop in his shoulders.

"Ah, I was nicely caught," he repeated, laughing quietly; "inquisitive people often are. I wondered who it could be so late. I feared some case of sickness. I never thought of you. Come into my sanctum."

He led the way into a small cosy room. It was

littered about with books and newspapers, and in a general state of disorder, as gentlemen's studies are apt to be where female hands are not allowed.

"No, not in here to-night," declined the doctor, decidedly. "Where's your wife? Bah! what an obnoxious smell of tobacco; quite poisonous. I am not too late to be welcome, I trust."

"Never too late for that, dear friend," said Mr. Mervin, earnestly. "You are welcome here always, at any hour, and ever will be. We are not, moreover, early people, if that circumstance will put your doubts any more to rest. Let us go to the dining-room; my wife and Ernie are there. This fire, I see, is getting low."

Mr. Mervin linked his arm within the doctor's. The contrast between them was striking; it was something like a strong upright oak and a slim, bending poplar standing side by side.

Mrs. Mervin sat near the fire, Ernest by her. She was a short, stout lady, with remarkably bright brown eyes. She had a pleasant face, motherly and kind. Her dress was plain black, simply made. The only dressy thing she wore was a showy head-dress, which had slipped to one side. Appearances never troubled Mrs. Mervin; at least, not an undue observance of them. She thought too much of other people's comfort to spend unnecessary time and care on herself. An active, energetic, cheerful woman was she. She rose briskly on the gentlemen's entrance.

"Welcome, doctor; glad to see you," she said, drawing a large easy chair near the fire, and holding out her little plump hand. "How good of you to look in such a cold evening. Ernest and I can scarcely manage to keep warm in spite of our good fire. We thought papa must have fallen asleep, he was so long in coming."

"Or else that he was called out," put in Ernest. "We heard a ring at the front door."

It was easy to see whom Ernest resembled; he was much like his mother. His eyes were brown, and nearly as bright, giving one the impression that he could distinguish objects a long way off. In reality, he was short-sighted, and anxious to wear spectacles, so that he might not have to peer into things so closely. You have seen him before with Norman Vivian. His short, thick-set figure bespoke a low stature in the future.

"You and I have met earlier to-day, Dr. Green," remarked Ernest, moving farther away from the fire, and making room for his father.

Dr. Green nodded his head in acquiescence.

"Ah! I meet all you young scamps pretty frequently. By the way," he broke in abruptly, "do you see much of Norman Vivian?"

"Scamps!" mildly reproved the vicar.

"You do not call Norman a scamp, surely," questioned Mrs. Mervin with a merry twinkle in her eye.

"Boys are all scamps," responded the doctor

with energy, "it's their nature. Ernest, you have not answered my question."

"We meet very often at school," said Ernest thoughtfully, and speaking slowly, "and are, of course, great friends. But Norman has been moved into the upper sixth form, so we do not join in lessons; he is far ahead of me, and since he has ridden to school we have not been so much together. If our ponies even start together, it is not so friendly as walking; no, truthfully speaking, we do not see much of each other."

"Humph!" said the doctor, "just as I feared. I guessed as much. Why is it you do not meet more often? is he not a favourite of yours? is there something you dislike in him?"

"Most certainly not," answered Ernest warmly. "I have just explained why we are not more together. There is everything to like in him—nothing to dislike. He is good and kind to all; he never does a wrong action, yet he never seems to pride himself on his goodness, and is as ready for play as the keenest. Norman is one of the few boys who may be termed a universal favourite."

"Oh! Ernest thinks very highly of Norman Vivian," interposed the vicar. "Before Norman had a pony he used to go shares with Ernest. It was amusing to hear their mode of progression. One boy rode a certain distance and then jumped off to let the other take his place. Was that not something of the style?"

Ernest coloured.

"Never be ashamed of a kind action," said his mother quickly. "No, doctor, the boys are not as good home friends as we could wish. Several times when we have asked Norman here Mrs. Duerdon has refused to let him come on some paltry pretext or other, so we concluded she did not consider our society worth cultivating, and have given over sending invitations in consequence. Mrs. Duerdon is very grand in her way, though between ourselves I do not acknowledge her right to presume over me."

"Ah! Fanny, pride pricks," and the vicar smiled quietly.

Mrs. Mervin shook her head, and looked round her own comfortable dining room and envied no one. It was a well-warmed, well-lighted room, cosy in the extreme, as Mrs. Mervin had a knack of making any room. Long moreen curtains, thick and heavy, in bright colour, shaded the windows and defied the cold to penetrate.

"Mrs. Duerdon is very proud, mother," assented Ernest (privately he stood much in awe of her grand ways). "Besides that, Norman himself does not always care to come; he is very fond of his sister, and they are so peculiarly placed that he does not like to leave her much, fearing she may be dull."

"Remedy that evil by inviting both," suggested Mr. Mervin quietly.

"Stuff and nonsense," interrupted the doctor, answering Ernest and ignoring the Vicar's remark. "Proud! who cares for any one's pride? Not such sensible people as we, surely. She's vain enough, I'll allow, vain as any peacock; just as people without much mind always are. Bah! I would turn her round my finger, and twenty more like her, as easy as I would look at them. Flatter that lot a bit," he added confidentially, "that's the way to come round 'em."

The vicar smiled calmly.

"Ah! you need not smile," retorted the doctor irritably. "Don't you think I know their ways? trust me."

No one answered. He turned to Mrs. Mervin.

"I want to enlist your sympathies and to coax that warm heart of yours."

"On behalf of whom?" inquired Mrs. Mervin in slight surprise.

"The Vivians," replied the doctor.

"Both of them," repeated Mrs. Mervin. "To speak the truth, doctor, I do not like the girl; she has such a discontented, forlorn face—it makes me miserable to look at her."

"For shame, mamma," said Mr. Mervin reproachfully, "that is not like one of your charitable speeches. Fanny, I am surprised at you."

"Have you ever seen Muriel smile?" put in Ernest.

"No, I do not know that I ever did."

"Then, mother, you can scarcely be a fair and competent judge. She has one of the sweetest smiles. Norman told me to watch."

"Very nice of her brother," approved Mr. Mervin. "I like boys to be attentive to their sisters."

"I have never cared to look at the girl more than I could help," went on Mrs. Mervin, nothing daunted. "She is so unlike my own happy smiling daughters."

"Likely enough," agreed Dr. Green, "and she is sure to be. Just consider the difference in her lonely position. Tut, tut, woman, you do not know what you are talking about, or, at least, if you do you would soon alter your opinion after you had seen Muriel a few times. She is a shy, retiring girl, who requires to be known to be liked. I can imagine what a different character she might have become had her parents lived. She has lost much bright vivacity by being kept so completely under control. Yet at times sudden flashes of happiness peep out most unexpectedly, showing glimpses of what is hers most naturally. It is pleasant to watch her with her brother, whom she loves with all the force and concentration of a strong heart."

"Ah! is it so," queried Mrs. Mervin, all her warm motherly feelings roused in pity. "Poor lonely child! I never looked at her in that light. I always pictured her as copying Mrs. Duerdon."

"Just so; allowing your prejudices to run away with your good sense, instead of letting that kind heart rule supreme," corrected Dr. Green in his straight-spoken way.

"What a noble face the boy has," put in Mr. Mervin; "he reminds me much of his mother. I often watch him in church. It is not his features which are good, nor his complexion, brilliant and dazzling as it is, nor those speaking eyes of his, looking so thoughtfully and wonderingly at you as if they would read your very heart through and through. No, it is none of these separately, yet it is all of them together, and the expression is so good, so pure and true, so almost heavenly. The boy, I verily believe, will do great things in the future. Sometimes, when his eyes are fixed on the gorgeous colouring of the east window, they dilate and glow with unspeakable feeling. I watch the rapt expression of his face, and it strikes me that thus may the saints have looked when gazing on their much-loved Lord."

Mr. Mervin was in general a man of few words, but he was given to flights of imagination, as quiet people of cultivation and refinement are nearly sure to be.

"Tut, tut; bosh!" gruffly responded the matter-of-fact doctor, not altogether pleased. "The face of a saint—fiddlesticks! It's the face of a good-hearted, earnest, lovable English boy, and that's far more to my way of thinking. Bah!

you should have seen him with that black eye of his; he did not look much of a saint then. Been fighting a boy bigger than himself you see; that's the kind of deed I like," and the doctor laughed heartily. His fervent admiration of Norman's bravery burst out warmly. "Ask them both here to please your old friend, and learn to study them. You will never regret your kindness. Bless your heart, you will grow to love them as your own children."

"Dr. Green is right," acquiesced Mrs. Mervin; "we will invite them here. Ernest is going to bring a couple of his friends over next week; I forget their names. What are they, Ernie?"

She looked round, but Ernest had disappeared.

"Went a short time since," observed the vicar quietly.

"Never mind their names," blustered the doctor. "Call them Dick, Tom, or Harry, it's all the same, so long as you invite the Vivians. By doing so you would be conferring a personal favour on me. Their father, as you know, was a clergyman, their mother one of the purest-minded women that ever lived. Ask them, and ask me to meet them; I will come at any time."

"You will!" uttered Mrs. Mervin in surprise. "You really mean what you say? I would give a great deal to get you here oftener."

"And earlier also, I presume," interposed Dr. Green, getting up ready to depart.

"That is casting reflection on our hospitality," declared Mrs. Mervin laughing. "To punish you properly for such a speech we will not let you go."

"The punishment is scarcely adequate to the offence, good madam; I am nothing loath to stay," and Dr. Green bumped himself back into his comfortable easy chair. "It is warm and cosy here," he continued; "I will stay another ten minutes; make a virtue of necessity as you will not let me stir."

The topic for the next ten minutes was on parish matters, in which Mr. Mervin was much interested. The doctor could tell him all fresh cases of sickness, and this pleased the vicar. He held the welfare of his people, spiritual and bodily, closely at heart, but the conversation soon veered round to the Vivians again. Perhaps the doctor was grieved at Norman's disappointment, and the thought of the boyish trouble would keep recurring to his mind, and so found vent in words. Fully had he determined not to mention the subject, but it escaped him unawares. He merely, however, mentioned the fact; he made no comments on it. Owen had a pony, and Norman was for the present riding it to school.

"Oh, he is not always going to ride then," said Mrs. Mervin; "it struck me it was rather too good to continue. We cannot help our thoughts, doctor."

And she shook her head knowingly, and the

wondrous head-dress, after tottering and nodding in the most mysterious way, finally came off.

Mrs. Mervin readjusted it in its original place, giving it an admonitory bang that from a more bony hand might have been felt, but which from her little plump paw could only be deemed a pat.

"The boy cannot ride unless he has something to ride," retorted the doctor bluntly, "any better than anybody else can."

"Mr. Duerdon will perhaps purchase him a pony when he meets a suitable one," suggested Mr. Mervin in his mild way.

This was only throwing oil on the flames.

"Bless my life, man, did you not hear me say that he had bought the creature for Owen instead?" burst irritably from the medical man. "I tell you what, Mervin; you keep to your sermons, man alive, and let your wife and me talk gossip and sense; it's more in our line."

And with this polite speech the doctor coolly turned his back on his pastor.

It was not from any want of respect; he had great reverence for his beloved vicar in spiritual matters, but in worldly affairs he looked upon him as totally deficient. He was right. Mr. Mervin was one of the most unbusinesslike of men, and would have been nowhere, figuratively speaking, without his practical wife. The disparity in their ages seemed great. In reality there was only ten years, but whilst the Vicar looked much more than

his sixty-seven years, his wife barely appeared fifty.

"Ah, ah!" laughed Mr. Mervin quietly, "so you would keep me to my sermons, Geoffry. 'Every cobbler to his last,' that is your maxim, is it? Fanny always enjoys a social chat."

"One of the numerous privileges of my sex," answered his cheerful wife. "You do not think, doctor," she continued hesitatingly, "you do not think that the Duerdons are unkind to the Vivians, do you?"

"Oh, you women, you women!" ejaculated the good man with fervour, "always trying to ferret some mystery out. One never knows what you are at. God forgive me that I should ever have led up to such a question. Of course the Duerdons are kind, or else why should they keep the Vivians? It is no light burden let me tell you, the care and charge of two growing children. It is not exactly the same as home I've no doubt, but unkindness I feel sure they never meet with. Duerdon is as good a fellow as you would come across in a lifetime, and his wife—well his wife is not particularly kind to any one unless herself, or some one who panders to that self's adornment. But she would not, I believe, be actually unkind to any one. She may lack thoughtfulness for their wants, consideration for their pleasures, sympathy in their woes, but unkind, oh dear, no."

Dr. Green spoke as he thought.

"Do you believe, then, that she likes the Vivians to the utmost of her ability?" persisted Mrs. Mervin, nothing daunted.

"Ah, that's another thing; now you have asked a sensible question," replied Dr. Green. "She likes them as much as—no that will not do either—she likes them as much as she likes that Maltese dog of hers I was going to say, with its eyes all covered with fluffy wool, so that you can never tell whether the animal is walking head or tail foremost. But that would not be a good illustration; the little fright is an especial favourite I believe. By the way," broke from him warmly, "if there's one thing I hate to see more than another, it is women, and women of education and refinement, petting and nursing such little brutes. Oh! I detest it. Why not take some poor, starving, neglected child out of the streets, and bestow on it a small amount of warmth of love? There are numbers, I fear, perishing in our land; children with souls to be saved, whilst these animals might easily be lessened by hundreds and never missed."

"I quite agree with you," eagerly responded Mrs. Mervin. "There are ladies of my own acquaintance, I am sorry to say, who fondle and pet their poodles, yet who cannot bear their garments to even brush by a badly clothed child. But, doctor, we are old-fashioned in our notions; we have wandered from our subject. You were going to compare Mrs. Duerdon's liking for the Vivians to some person or thing."

"Ex-act-ly so. You have helped me, madam, out of my dilemma," said the doctor ironically. His mood had completely changed. "Person or thing. Well! I think 'thing' represents my meaning best. Mrs. Duerdon cares for the Vivians much in the same way that you care for your cow."

Mrs. Mervin laughed.

"I am glad to hear you say that, for I am very fond of dear old Polly."

Dr. Green raised his eyebrows and made a funny grimace.

"That example will not serve then. Sold again," he said. "Suppose we leave it for the present."

Mrs. Mervin was silent. She read the doctor's humour better perhaps than he did himself. She pondered over the conversation long after his departure, and it troubled her. Had she read as much or more than he meant to convey? It was difficult to decide. One point she was clear on; he had had a motive in all that he had done. She felt sorry somehow. Had she treated the Vivians as she would have wished people to treat her children had they been left orphans? No; she felt she had failed in her duty. Not intentionally, not thoughtlessly, yet in a way willingly, simply because it had been easier to refrain from showing them kindness than to endure calmly Mrs. Duerdon's cold refusals. Why had she not persevered in offering them kind invitations, and by the

warmth and persistency of her solicitations melted the frost and ice of her neighbour's frowns? She owned herself a coward. It was a great reproach to the warm, honest heart, overflowing with the milk of human kindness towards all around, when she reflected that she had had to be reminded of her duty by the solicitations of the childless doctor. To think that he, an old and solitary bachelor, should have more care for children than she who had nursed and cherished so many helpless infants between those sheltering arms. It quite grieved her.

"George, dear," she remarked to her husband the next day, "we must not forget the object of Dr. Green's call last night, but keep our word, and invite the young Vivians. Ernest has promised to bring Alan Murray, and another boy whose name I forget, and we can have a youthful party."

Mr. Mervin mildly assented, as he always did to any proposition of his wife's. He was not fond of company, but then these things had to be, and his old friend had promised to come, and that would compensate for any little drawbacks.

"You must arrange everything as you think best, Fanny," he said. "I am always perfectly satisfied with your management. Perhaps, as Dr. Green says, we have failed in kindness to the Vivians. Should we ask Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon to come as well?"

"Decidedly not," answered the practical little woman promptly. "Children are more at home in a youthful party. No, not this time, George. We will invite Owen with the others; that will be a more satisfactory arrangement."

It was finally settled that the party should come off in a week's time. Thursday was the day chosen.

On Monday morning the Mervins were greatly surprised to receive a letter from their eldest daughter saying she would come with two of her children early in the week to pay a short visit. Her husband was a great invalid, and she was rarely able to come, though only living a distance of some fourteen miles or so off. After they had discussed Mrs. Danvers and her contemplated visit, Mr. Mervin greatly astonished his wife by proposing to make a call at Astley Park alone. She thought her ears must have played her false, so rarely was it he called anywhere, and then always with great unwillingness. Mrs. Mervin looked upon his proposition as simply marvellous. It was so wonderful that he should of his own free-will suggest going; it was almost incredible. She had quite expected the unpleasant duty would devolve on her, and had partly nerved herself for the ordeal, and now to have such a burden unexpectedly and spontaneously lifted off her shoulders was more than she could credit.

"You will wish me to accompany you, George," she most magnanimously volunteered.

"Not this time, Fanny. I can manage to call alone, and you will be busy superintending the preparation of bedrooms," answered her husband uneasily.

Mr. Mervin was acting a part, and it did not sit well on him. The fact of the matter was Dr. Green had privately solicited him to give the invitation himself, feeling sure the chances of its being accepted were much greater than if Mrs. Mervin and the lady at Astley Park met. He knew the quick, warm heart of the vicar's wife would be much sooner roused to indignation at the indolence and affectation and apparent want of sympathy in all that concerned the Vivians, than would the anger of her husband. His feelings were more under control; were not, moreover, so easily excited, and he could, besides, show greater forbearance, even when aroused. So with many qualms of conscience at not apprising his wife with the why and the wherefore of his expedition, and greatly dreading she would oppose such an unheard-of proceeding, Mr. Mervin hesitatingly made known his intentions. Contrary to his expectations, she was, as has been seen, charmed at the new turn events were taking. It was the very plan she herself would have suggested had she entertained the slightest hope of success.

"It is very thoughtful of you, dear George," she said, approvingly. "If I were not so busy, I should have positively refused to let you go alone."

This nice speech cut Mr. Mervin to the heart. He reproached himself greatly for the innocent little deception he was practising. It was so seldom he kept a secret from the prized wife of so many years, that he could not bear its light weight.

Mrs. Mervin threw a small shawl over her head, greatly to the detriment of the showy head-dress which collapsed considerably under the pressure brought to bear on it, and walked with her husband down the drive to the gate. Then she stood and watched him until he was out of sight. His tall stooping figure was soon gone. Mrs. Mervin re-entered the gate, and it clicked and clicked as long as she was within hearing.

"I wish him success, my dear old man," inwardly commented Mrs. Mervin. "His mild persuasive manner will win the day where my impulsive speech might draw me into trouble."

By which avowal it may be inferred that Dr. Green was not very far wrong in his estimate of Mrs. Mervin's character.

Mr. Mervin was fortunate in finding both Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon at home. They received him graciously. Muriel was in the drawing-room when he entered, but left at a sign from Mrs. Duerdon. The conversation was general at first. The vicar was in no hurry. He rarely was, it was not his way, but at last he turned to Mrs. Duerdon and made known the object of his visit.

Mr. Duerdon looked anxiously at his wife.

"Thursday," he remarked, "is rather an awkward day, Norman is at school then."

"So is Ernest as a rule," was the quiet reply, "but a holiday once in a way will not harm either of them."

"You say so, this from you," put in Mrs. Duerdon, graciously, "you quite astonish me, I thought you were such a stickler for education."

"True, I am," assented the vicar, mildly, "a great advocate for it—in reason, but all work and no play—you remember the adage. Two more boys, friends of Ernest's, are coming—friends of Norman's also, I daresay."

"You had better let him go, Fred," interposed Mrs. Duerdon, "but as it is a boys' party you must allow me to decline for Muriel."

"I have framed my invitation badly, I fear," said Mr. Mervin, "if I have given you the impression that we were only expecting boys. My eldest grand-daughter Caroline Danvers is coming with her mother to-morrow, she will stay over Thursday, as she is somewhere about Miss Vivian's age, they will I trust be nice companions."

There was a slight pause, broken by Mr. Duerdon.

"Muriel has no school in the afternoon, has she Clara, that you hesitate ?"

"She has none, but she is so *gauche*, so unaccustomed to society, that I fear for her behaviour."

"All the more reason, my dear, that you should embrace every opportunity for improving her manners."

"My wife also desired me to say that if you will permit your little boy to join the party, that the greatest care shall be taken of him."

This quite smoothed matters. The frowns on Mrs. Duerdon's face which had gradually been collecting there dispersed, and an affable smile reflected itself.

"Very kind and attentive of Mrs. Mervin," murmured she. "Well I suppose I must say that Muriel shall come. Owen must be left an open question. If it is a fine day he will be very happy to avail himself of your kind invitation."

"He can go in the close carriage," urged Mr. Duerdon, "so that the weather will make no difference to him."

"Of course he will be sent in the large carriage, but if the day is cold, he will be subjected to draughts."

"Do not ruin the child's health by over-anxiety, Clara. It is such a short way to the vicarage, he cannot well take cold. Let him go, it will be so delightful for him to mix with other children."

Mr. Mervin sat passive. Owen's going or staying away was of no moment to him, he had gained his object, the Vivians had accepted.

"You will allow me to leave his acceptance un-

certain I trust," said Mrs. Duerdon, addressing herself to the vicar, and ignoring her husband's wishes. "Owen is an extremely delicate child, fragile like myself, we must be careful of him."

Mr. Mervin bowed acquiescence and shortly after took his leave.

CHAPTER XIII.

Thursday turned out a fine bright day, cold but clear. Norman and Ernest rode home side by side, in high glee at the enjoyable treat that lay before them. Alan Murray and George Atherton were coming after dinner. Muriel was delighted at the idea of having her brother home to luncheon. In the contemplation of such a prospect, the pleasure beyond got quite swallowed up, it was as good as two Saturdays in one week, she declared. She was practising in the breakfast-room on an old piano of Broadwood's that had once been her mother's, when Norman arrived. The afternoon was usually devoted to music, but Muriel feared she might be too much occupied after lunch to devote enough time, so with Miss Bradshaw's full permission she spent her idle hour in the morning. Muriel had a great love for music, and also great talent for it, but so far she was neither a brilliant nor a showy player. Her ear was very correct, her touch good, and she played with great expression. She felt strongly inclined to desert her post when Norman appeared, it was a strong temptation, but Muriel had learnt to resist temptations. She sprang up and gave him his usual greeting, a

kiss on each cheek, French fashion, and then sat down again.

"I must go on practising, Nor," she said, quietly, "I am sorry I cannot go out this morning."

Norman made no answer, but he lifted off his Glengarry cap and threw it down, then he took a seat by her side. He was fond of music also, and fonder of listening to Muriel than to any one else. He knew nearly all her pieces by heart, though he had not had many opportunities lately of hearing her play. But sometimes on a Saturday when it was wet, he would take a book and sit near while she practised diligently.

"When you have finished that 'Morceau de Salon,' Muny, will you play 'Agnus Dei?'" he petitioned.

She willingly acceded, and when its sad wail was concluded, her fingers wandered into Handel's well-known "Comfort ye." It was a piece they both loved. Has anything deeper or grander ever been composed. They both sang, and their two voices, youthful and clear, blended harmoniously together.

Mr. Duerdon hurried in briskly and somewhat noisily to fetch a paper, but the touching melody so exquisitely rendered, touched him, and he sat down quietly to listen. He never as long as he lived forgot that incident, it made such a strong impression on him. Years afterwards something

recalled it vividly to his mind, and then as now, he sat down and listened, although the voices that sang it were far away and the sounds existed only in his own mind. Yet in imagination he could hear each note distinct and ringing.

"Well done," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon, warmly, as the air died away. "I had no idea you two sang so nicely. It has been quite a treat."

Muriel flushed with pleasure. Well-merited praise is always sweet.

"I did not know you were here, Uncle Fred," she said, simply.

"Did we succeed pretty well?" asked Norman, "we have neither of us, as you are aware learnt, and it is only arranged for one voice, so I suppose it was not exactly correct. Still, Uncle Fred, I like to hear Muriel sing better than any one in the whole world. I think she has one of the sweetest voices, though there is such a sad wail in it. Have you ever noticed it?" he asked, in a lower tone.

Mr. Duerdon looked up amused, but he was completely sobered by the look on Norman's face. It was a thoughtful wistful look that penetrated to the heart.

"You both sing very sweetly," he replied, "and it has given me great pleasure to hear you. Your mother was a splendid singer, and you inherit her voice. It is a great gift."

"I wish we could become like her," fervently aspirated Norman. "Every one speaks well of

her, so she must have been nice. I often fancy Muriel grows more as she was. Am I right?"

"You resemble your mother the most," answered Mr. Duerdon, "you are your mother's own boy, I think her spirit is in you. Muriel, with the exception of her voice, is more like your father."

"Dear papa and mamma," breathed Muriel, softly, "I wonder whether they are watching over us. It would be very nice to think they were."

"In all probability they are," responded Mr. Duerdon, "we are not distinctly told these things, but if it be so, what pleasure would it give them to hear you both singing so reverently."

"I wonder Uncle Fred, whether our departed friends are allowed to watch over us?"

"Aye, my boy, hundreds have pondered that question, I myself think they are. Anyway we know we shall meet them again by-and-bye, if we walk steadily in the right path."

"I am sure, dear Uncle Fred, we both try," said Norman, gently, his eyes glistening.

"My boy, I never doubted it." And Mr. Duerdon grasped the boy's hand. "I never doubted it for one minute. Muriel must have singing lessons at once, such a voice must be cultivated. There is a good master at Jycliffe, singularly enough I only heard of him a week ago, whilst making inquiries for your dancing master. Hark! there is the luncheon gong, we shall all be late."

There was a general rush, Norman jumped up-

stairs three steps at a time. Mr. Duerdon followed more leisurely, but still in a hurry, and Muriel, who was quite neat, walked into the dining-room. Mrs. Duerdon was in her place at the table, sitting bolt upright.

"How is it you are all late?" demanded Mrs. Duerdon, in a fretful tone. "It is a remarkable thing that I am the only one who can appear at the table in anything like time, the sole person who has any occupation is punctual."

Muriel was going to say she had been practising but she stifled the birth of speech in a strained cough.

"Owen too," continued the mistress of the house. "I gave orders for him to be brought, he is old enough. I wonder why the child does not come."

"Should I go and fetch him?" offered Muriel, timidly. "I will not be long."

"You may go," acquiesced Mrs. Duerdon, loftily, "but mind you are not many minutes. Stay, what is that noise?"

Muriel listened. Voices could be distinguished in the distance.

"Don't nurse," pleaded Owen, "me not want to go," and then succeeded Spence's lower tones, coaxing and firm.

"The child positively prefers his nurse's society to mine," declared Mrs. Duerdon, in unmitigated surprise, "what low taste he has—it must be corrected."

No very wonderful phenomenon, that if she had only stopped to consider who had the actual bringing up of the child; in whose society the principal hours of his life were spent. Owen was in reality more of Spence's child than her own: comparatively speaking, he and his mother were strangers.

"May I go and fetch him?" again ventured Muriel, "he seems shy."

Mrs. Duerdon waved her hand with a grand air as much as to say, "Go, you are all alike, incomprehensible and stupid. I do not understand your queer ways."

Muriel did not wait for a second permission, but ere she reached the door a glad exclamation from Owen burst on her ears.

"Oh, nurse, there's Norman, me go with him. Carwy me, Norman."

One moment and they were in the room. Owen's arms round Norman's neck, his delicate face fondly pressed against the older boy's. It was a pretty picture, but it did not please Mrs. Duerdon.

"Put the child down, Norman," she said, peevishly, "do you wish to ruin him by making a thorough baby of him."

Norman complied, the rich colour dyed his cheeks at the rebuke, but he kissed the little upturned face. A servant brought a high chair and placed it near Mrs. Duerdon.

"Me not sit there," whispered Owen, "me sit near Norman."

Norman had to put his head down to catch the low tones, and Mrs. Duerdon did not hear.

"What is the cause of all this delay?" she demanded, "there seems to be no order in the house. Parkyn, place Master Owen in his chair."

"Owen wishes to sit near me," spoke up Norman, in his frank open way. "May I move his chair. I will be responsible for his good behaviour."

An angry frown rose on Mrs. Duerdon's face.

"No Norman, he cannot sit near you, I am surprised at your asking. The absurdity of repeating a little child's request, I would have given you credit for greater sense."

Again Norman's cheeks flushed painfully.

"Parkyn," continued Mrs. Duerdon, "lift Master Owen in his chair."

Parkyn proceeded to obey, but he had no easy task. Strong man as he was, his strength was nowhere when opposed to the kicking, screaming child. Of course if he might have used force, Owen would soon have been conquered, but Parkyn knew his place too well to do otherwise than receive sundry kicks and plunges manfully. The scene grew exciting, Owen positively refused to be touched. He stamped his feet, threw himself about in all directions, and behaved in a rebellious way hitherto entirely unknown. Had his mamma spoken to him, or suffered the Vivians to interfere, in all probability he would have given

way. But she would not. She sat still with an angry look on her face, that frightened the child. She marvelled at any one daring to presume in her presence. Most of all she wondered at her own quiet obedient inoffensive little Owen breaking out in that dreadful way. He had suddenly become most refractory.

"Me sit near Norman, me want to sit near Norman," was his persistent cry, and at last nearly exhausted, sobbed out, "Oh Muny, help me."

It was a distressing scene, Muriel's heart ached for the child, naughty as he was. It was such fearful mismanagement. Both she and Norman were very fond of Owen; had he in very truth been their brother, they could scarcely have cared more for him. But their love was powerless now, one kind word, one coaxing action, and all would have been right, but they dared not give it. Yet one effort Norman was determined to make, even at the risk of getting into punishment.

"Please forgive Owen, Mrs. Duerdon," he begged, "forgive him this time. He is very shy. Let him sit near me. He will be good for the future."

"Unce Owen fwightened. Owen will be good," sobbed the child.

"Owen is very naughty," declared his mother, in the most uncompromising tone. "He either sits near me or else goes upstairs to the nursery, which will he do?"

"Owen go upstairs to nurse," answered the child, readily. "Nurse love poor little Owen, she not make him cwy," he sobbed.

"Take him upstairs then," said Mrs. Duerdon, angrily, "I cannot have the house upset this way."

Muriel jumped up and took Owen by the hand. He was quiet, his passion quite subdued. Muriel would have carried him had she dared, but she feared a repetition of Norman's reproof. Outside in the hall she stopped and knelt down. Owen looked at her and twined his two little arms around her neck.

"Give me a kiss, Murry," he pleaded, holding his button-hole of a mouth up to her.

She kissed him several times.

"Muriel loves Owen very much," she said, "but she is very sorry he did not do as his mamma told him. Owen has not been a good boy."

Her tone was very gentle, and she spoke in the caressing way grown-up people use to a beloved child. It had a good effect upon Owen. He looked at her wistfully.

"Owen go back and be good," he said, after a pause. "Here's papa coming, he'll take Owen."

Muriel glanced round and saw Mr. Duerdon coming. She got up, and in a few words briefly explained the circumstances.

"Thank you, Muriel, you have behaved with kindness and discretion. I will make all right."

He took Owen by the hand and led him to his wife.

"Mamma, I have brought you a good boy," was all he said, and lifted the child in his chair.

Owen was perfectly quiet, and Mrs. Duerdon was amazed.

Norman looked carefully on his plate, he had caught sight of a very piteous look, which the slightest encouragement might have reduced to tears.

"My plan was successful, I have brought Owen to his proper senses I am glad to see," remarked Mrs. Duerdon, in a self-congratulatory tone.

Mr. Duerdon looked up inquiringly. He did not catch the drift of her remark. Had he been present all the time he might have questioned the wisdom of a firmness that proceeded from jealousy rather than from love, he might have doubted the power of unbending angry correction. But he had been away, and therefore could not be expected to be a good judge even if required. He went on with the carving.

"You are very late," resumed his wife, presently. "If you had come at the proper time you would have saved me considerable annoyance."

"Had an accident, my dear, I upset a whole jug of water. A case of the most haste the least speed."

"I do not see that that need have kept you,"

uttered Mrs. Duerdon, discontentedly. "You surely did not stay to put all right yourself. Why not have rung for a servant instead of delaying lunch?"

"I had not time to ring Clara; I was in too great a stew. I threw towel after towel in to mop up the wet. It was a mess I can assure you."

Mrs. Duerdon did not look at all pleased, and he hastened to add—

"It has not done any harm to the carpet," his tone was conciliating, and Mrs. Duerdon did not pursue the topic.

After lunch was over she beckoned Muriel to her.

"Major will tell you what to wear this afternoon," she said. "I am too fatigued after the distressing events of the morning, to interest myself in the matter. She will have hard work to make you look nice, you are so very plain, but she must do her best."

Major's interference was always a sore subject with Muriel, she disliked the maid's assumption of power.

"There is no need for me to ask Major," she replied, "I have no choice of dress. There is only my best in addition to the one I am wearing."

"She can pin on a few bows and laces," interposed Norman, brightly, "and you will look so nice, Muriel."

"You get your clothes spoilt very quickly," sighed Mrs. Duerdon, unheeding Norman's kind intervention, "there is no keeping you tidy. I do not believe you ever try to put your dresses in order."

It was on the very tip of Muriel's tongue to say—

"I have no dresses to put in order," but her old power of self-control came luckily to her aid.

"Do not stand staring at me in that helpless way, Muriel, but go to Major as I before told you. It is strange you need telling so many times. Is it dulness or temper?"

Muriel made no answer. Norman linked his arm through his sister's.

"We must both be dense," he said, with his sunniest laugh. "I more so than Muriel. We will go at once now that we know it is your wish. Come, Muny."

His pleasing manner and anxiety to spare all annoyance, his winning smile and ready obedience were infectious. Muriel cleared up and Mrs. Duerdon nodded graciously.

"I wish Muriel was more like you, Norman," she remarked.

But luckily the Vivians were both too far off to hear the comparison drawn.

CHAPTER XIV.

Shortly after three o'clock, Owen under Spence's escort started in the close carriage for the vicarage. He was beautifully dressed and looked well. His fair hair curled prettily, and his small doll's face was enlivened by colour. He wore a purple velvet tunic, nicely made and trimmed, his white drawers with their pretty lace trimmings just showing. Owen was short and babyish for his years. Many boys at his age are in knickerbockers, but Mrs. Duerdon liked to dress him stylishly as long as she could. There was so little room for displaying taste in boys' dress she averred.

Frank Danvers was ready to receive Owen. Frank was only four, but he was dressed in kilts, and looked older, he was a tall strong-limbed child. Owen took to him at once, and much to Spence's astonishment, allowed her to leave without a murmur.

It was a new experience to him, having a companion, and he enjoyed it. Besides this Norman and Muriel were coming later on, and this quelled all his doubts and fears.

It was after four when the Vivians arrived. They had had an enjoyable walk, and this made

them later than they had intended. The roses sparkled in their cheeks, especially in Norman's. Ernest met them near the gate, he had run out to look for them, and as luck would have it, they all met together. He led them in the dining-room.

Mrs. Mervin received Norman with outstretched hands, Muriel she was slightly stiffer with, though quite unconsciously so.

"I seem to know you both so well," she declared, "and yet you are almost strangers. You must make yourselves perfectly at home and we shall soon be good friends."

"We will," assented Norman, readily.

"Have you seen anything of Dr. Green," inquired Mr. Mervin.

"No; but Dr. Green saw something of them," replied a hearty voice behind. "He has been running and shouting and trying to catch 'em up, but they would not be stopped."

"I wonder Ernest did not see you," laughed Muriel, perfectly at ease directly she saw her old friend.

"Ah, that's right, try and put the blame on some one else's shoulders if you can, Miss Muriel."

"Well, it was wonderful," agreed Norman, "because he met us, and therefore must have had his face directed towards you."

"There are many marvellous things occurring daily in this extraordinary land of ours," replied the doctor, with equanimity. "Well, are not you youngsters ready for games, eh?"

"We will join Alan and George," said Ernest, "they are with the small tribe in the next room."

"And find your cousin Caroline," put in Mrs. Mervin, "and send her here."

The boys walked off.

"Cousin Caroline," repeated the doctor, "I am never clear at relationships I own, but this time I am more mystified than ever, seeing neither you nor the vicar have brothers or sisters with children. Who can you mean?"

Mrs. Mervin laughed pleasantly. "You may well be puzzled, doctor, for my two sisters are both unmarried, and my husband has only one brother married. I mean Matilda's daughter."

"Well, that surely would be Ernest's sister?" interrogated Dr. Green, still at sea.

"Ernest's niece, you mean," corrected Mrs. Mervin. "Yes, Carrie is Ernie's niece, but they are so nearly of an age that they neither of them like to own to the relationship."

"I know where we are now, but when we come to call an elephant a rhinoceros matters get puzzling," blustered Dr. Green.

A very animated discussion concerning cousins in general, and Mrs. Mervin's relations in particular, ensued. In the midst of it a tall lady and a young girl entered the room. Mrs. Mervin jumped up quickly and took Muriel by the hand.

"This, my dear, is Mrs. Danvers, my eldest

daughter, and Caroline Danvers. Matilda, this is Muriel Vivian, from the Park."

Mrs. Danvers and her daughter bowed somewhat formally. This did not suit warm-hearted Mrs. Mervin, who was more partial to kisses than bows.

"You two girls must get well acquainted with each other," she said, "for it's just possible Caroline may stay some time."

Mrs. Danvers was something like her mother in the face, though less contented and bright-looking. In height she resembled her father, though as yet she had not his stoop. She smiled placidly at Muriel.

"I have some recollection of you as a little girl some years after I married. You used to come to church in a large Leghorn hat, but I daresay you have forgotten me. My husband's health has been so delicate that I have never been able to leave him for longer than a day or two at a time, and never latterly I believe on a Sunday."

Muriel mumbled something which she meant for "I do not remember you," but no one caught what she said.

"Those large Leghorn hats were very fashionable, Matilda," remarked Mrs. Mervin, pathetically. She felt saddened by the reminiscences of past days thus suddenly recalled. "There has never been anything so pretty since."

"Oh, grandma," uttered Caroline, in disgust,

"I think they must have been perfect horrors. They hid every bit of the face, and were regularly dowdy."

"Caroline," reproved her mamma.

"I mean what I say, mamma," answered the young lady, with freedom.

"Never mind her, Matilda," observed Mrs. Mervin, good-naturedly. "My views are somewhat old-fashioned, and Carrie wants to convert me."

"Old-fashioned. I should just think you are, grandma, and mamma is nearly as bad."

"And yet, my dear, with all our old-fangled notions," said Mrs. Mervin, speaking with dignity, "we always respected our parents' taste without venturing to offer an opinion."

Caroline was silenced. She went and stood behind her mother's chair. She was a tall, fair girl, with very blue eyes and a good complexion. Caroline Danvers was good-looking, and she was perfectly aware of the fact. Vanity was her besetting sin, and vanity needs other sins to wait on it. Yet in the main she was not a bad girl, somewhat frivolous and light, as vain characters are apt to be, but not altogether bad-hearted. She was in every respect as great a contrast to Muriel Vivian as it would be well possible to find. Caroline was Muriel's senior by several years, and she was much the taller though she lacked the grave manner, the stayed demeanour that characterized our heroine.

"Should we elderly people adjourn to the breakfast-room," suggested Mrs. Mervin, "and leave the young people to enjoy themselves until tea is ready." She got up as she spoke and looked round.

"We must go to the study or some other room," responded Mrs. Danvers, rising leisurely, "the little ones are in the breakfast-room, Mrs. Larkins' three youngest have come, and there are several others, total strangers to me. There is quite a large party."

"Oh, the Ritchies and Dunlops from Jycliffe," returned Mrs. Mervin.

Dr. Green had been reading, but he put the paper down. "May I take a peep at them all?" he asked, opening the door.

A grand dust and bustle was apparent, but the instant the doctor was seen play was suspended. One little boy in excitement and fright began to scream. Frank Danvers immediately ran up to him. "Don't cry, boy," he said, putting his arms protectingly round the stranger. "Don't cry, no one shall hurt you. Go away, naughty man, we does not want you here." And Master Frank kicked out sturdily with his little foot.

Mrs. Danvers smiled placidly, she was accustomed to childhood's varying moods. "Hush, Frank," she said in reproof, "that is one of grandmamma's best friends. Come and shake hands."

This Master Frank declined to do. He held himself sturdily upright, and frowned from a distance.

"You come, then, Owen," coaxed Dr. Green, holding out his hand.

Owen advanced slowly, he did not care to be placed in a prominent position before so many, and he quite hung his head as the doctor lifted him up.

"What a splendidly dressed child," exclaimed Mrs. Danvers, in admiration. "What a pity for him to spoil his clothes in play. I will run upstairs and fetch one of Frank's large cover-all pinafores." She was soon back with a good-sized round diaper that hid the grand velvet tunic from sight.

"Ah, that's sensible, Matilda," said Mrs. Mervin, approvingly. "What a pity it is people will send their children out in such expensive clothes. No woman ever dressed her youngsters more nicely than I used," added the good woman, with pardonable pride, "yet no one spent less on them."

"Ay, true," agreed the doctor, "but you had your little weaknesses. Now, what I say is keep a child neat and clean, and any old sack will do."

"Oh, Dr. Green!" dissented Mrs. Danvers, "I think children require to be nicely dressed, but let them be taught to take care of their clothes."

"Unfortunate little mortals!" said Dr. Green, making a grimace, "you would render their young lives a burden to them. No, dress them as simply and inexpensively as it is possible, and they will be all the better both mentally and bodily."

"A grand argument on dress for and against," observed Mrs. Mervin, mischievously, "and it is my firm conviction that we are none of us competent judges. We will go to the study now, as we are decidedly in the way here. What a comfort it is to have so many rooms."

The Vicarage was full of small apartments, as houses are apt to be that have been built to several times. The only two large rooms in the house were the dining and drawing-rooms, and they were both in the new part.

Muriel and Caroline soon got friendly. Caroline Danvers had visited a great deal, and was not shy. She summed up Muriel in a few minutes, and her deductions were not over satisfactory. She judged her *outré* and awkward, and so Muriel was, until quite at her ease, but Caroline failed to find the intelligence and depth of feeling, the marked character and strong mind of her new friend, which were completely hidden by shyness. They were chatting away quite freely about Muriel's singing-master, when the four boys joined them, no outward token of this nervous shyness perceptible. Alan Murray recognised Muriel at once. He went forward and shook hands, but Muriel did not remember him until he spoke. Then her adventure in the boys' playground recurred vividly to her.

"It was dark when I met you last time," she said, apologetically. "I never should have forgotten your face if I had seen it well."

This was an obvious compliment, but it did not confuse Alan. He was too accustomed to flattery.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, gaily. "You mean I am so handsome. *Cela va sans dire.* All my relations are the same. I come of a good-looking family." He did not seem to be boasting, he was merely asserting a well-known fact that was patent to all.

"Besides," continued Muriel, after the laugh had subsided, "you had me at a disadvantage. I did not know you were coming, and in all probability you heard I was here."

"Fie, fie, Miss Vivian, you are trying to turn the conversation from my handsome self. Well, to confess, I did hear you formed one of the party, and it made me anxious to come. I ought to have gone home to Stonecourt to-day, the mother expects me, but I have put off my return until to-morrow."

"How kind of you," said Muriel, quietly, "I am sure Ernest and Norman will be very glad," and she raised her eyes and gave him one of her rare smiles. "Norman and I have so few friends that it will be nice to make one more."

"There is George Atherton, too, waiting to be introduced Muriel," said Norman, in a low voice.

Muriel glanced up, and caught sight of a very round, pudding-faced boy. She had not noticed him before. He bowed, and Muriel returned the bow coldly. She was not taken by his looks—she was a quick discerner of character.

"I have also seen you before, Miss Vivian," he observed, "do you not remember me?"

"Was it on the playground at Jycliffe, too?" asked Muriel. "I have no recollection of you."

George Atherton laughed, but made no answer, and there was an awkward pause.

Muriel joined Caroline at the piano. "Oh, do not play just now, Miss Danvers," begged one of the boys, "let us have proverbs."

"Proverbs, proverbs, decidedly," pronounced all. "The nicest game we could have."

Caroline proved very clever at bringing a difficult word in, and the time passed quickly. Tea was announced, and then all met together. Flushed and animated faces beamed round the table, and none was livelier than Dr. Green's. Almost directly that meal was concluded the close carriage came for Owen. The little fellow was not willing to leave, but on being assured that he should come another day, he was at last persuaded to go. A message was left for the Vivians to the effect that the pony carriage would be at the Vicarage by ten o'clock, and they must not keep it waiting.

"A very good hour for young people," grunted the doctor, "suppose we set to and make the most of our time."

And they did set to in real earnest, and spent a most enjoyable evening; all but the vicar joined in the games. Dr. Green and Mrs. Mervin were wonderfully full of good spirits, they formed the life and prime movers of everything. Mrs. Danvers constantly joined her father. She did not

wish him to feel either dull or neglected. If Mr. Mervin had expected the doctor to sit and enjoy a quiet chat he was doomed to disappointment, for never until all the youths had left did the good man leave the games. The fun reached its height when blind-man's-buff became the order of the evening; then was shouting and busy confusion. Mrs. Danvers went to see what all the romping and loud laughing was about, and got there just as Dr. Green was blindfolded.

"Alan," she whispered, "do go to the study and try and persuade papa to come and watch the game, it will amuse him."

Alan nodded gaily. "All right, I will bring him back," he said, running off.

Alan had not been far wrong when he had laughingly remarked on his handsome looks. He was a well-grown, strongly made, healthy specimen of boyhood, tall and gentlemanly, with a proud, manly carriage, which spoke of unchecked authority. He was fair-skinned, with nut-brown hair clustering in heavy masses, curling round his well-shaped head. His eyes were blue, and a mouth almost too small for masculine beauty, but red and thin-lipped, completed the picture. Mrs. Danvers regarded him attentively on his return. He was a son of whom any mother might be proud.

"I have failed to execute your commission, but not from want of using persuasive powers," said Alan lightly. "Mr. Mervin is thoroughly happy

in the enjoyment of his pipe, and some learned periodical he is perusing. He begged you would excuse him."

"I am sorry he will not come," responded Mrs. Danvers; "look how cleverly Dr. Green dodges about backwards and forwards; he might be a boy. I think I'll see if my diplomacy can win papa here."

"Dr. Green has the gift of ubiquity, I verily believe," remarked Alan, but he spoke to himself. Mrs. Danvers had disappeared.

The mirth was unbounded. Muriel flew about like a bird, all excitement and enjoyment. Norman beheld her with delight. The perspiration rolled off the doctor's face; he was wilder and noisier than the wildest, and confusion and laughter reached its height when Mrs. Mervin was captured. Laughing and panting, the stout little lady protested she dare not be blindfolded. Norman proffered his services. They were thankfully accepted, and so the evening sped on. Mrs. Mervin was as sorry as any when it was time to break up.

"This is only the commencement of our friendship," she observed to the Vivians as they took leave.

She was won over by their simple, unaffected manners, and their ready gratitude. Her opinion of Muriel had quite changed, and she was ready to veer round into the other extreme. Norman she had always liked. She preferred his

bright, refined face, with its intellectual intelligence, to Alan's openly asserted beauty.

"I regret more than ever," she remarked to her husband, "the time we have lost in cultivating the Vivians' acquaintance. It seems strange to have had them among us and near us so long without learning to love them."

"You must not reproach yourself unnecessarily, Fanny. I scarcely think any blame attaches to you. We invited them many times, and only desisted because our overtures were repulsed, and repulsed also not altogether in politeness. This is the first time they have been allowed to come; perhaps it may be the last."

In the meantime the pony carriage rolled homewards.

Dr. Green had taken a seat with them, but did not get out when they reached the turn that led to his house. He tucked the rug carefully round Muriel.

"Wrap yourself up well, Norman," he said; "good people are scarce. It is bitterly cold, freezing, I verily believe. How have you both enjoyed your evening?"

"Immensely; it has been most enjoyable," rejoined Norman. "Is not Alan a nice boy? he is so much above the general run at school. He seems to me to carry gentleman stamped about him."

"No more than other people," replied Dr. Green

roughly. "He has plenty of self-assurance, and is never thwarted. People can afford to be very amiable then. He is very proud and haughty I can imagine at times."

"Yes, he is; he will not mix with many at school, and is not, therefore, much liked. But I never heard of his doing a shabby thing. His manner always demands respect. I should like to imitate Murray."

"Imitate no one, my boy, keep your own noble self, and you will do."

"Was it not kind of the Mervins asking us?" put in Muriel. "What a noise and upset we made. I wish we could have a party in return. Heigho! the more liberty we get the more we want."

And Muriel sighed.

"It would be very nice," agreed Norman, "but we must not think of such a thing."

"Eh, eh! what are you wishing?" inquired the doctor, whose thoughts had been wandering. "Concocting plots and revolutions, arranging parties, and nobody knows what. Eh, what remark did I catch just now?"

"Oh, nothing particular," sighed Norman. "Our words will scarcely bear repetition. You will be shocked at the enormity of our desires. We were remarking how delightful a party at Astley Park would be."

"For one moment the notion occurred to me,"

affirmed Muriel, "and I mentioned it aloud just as the idea flashed through my head. It was utterly absurd of me to mention such a subject, was it not?"

"I do not see anything absurd or incongruous in such wishes," dissented Dr. Green. "Why do you both consider yourselves so foolish? It appears perfectly natural and rational to me that you should desire to entertain your friends in return for the hospitality they show."

"Mrs. Duerdon would not care for a noisy party," replied Norman, trying to speak lightly. "Please do not say any more about it. I regret we alluded to the matter."

"Mrs. Duerdon not like a party!" echoed the doctor. "I like that; it is one of the richest absurdities I ever heard mooted. Why Norman, she revels in visiting of all kind. Douglas, drive round the park once more."

Douglas did as he was desired.

"She would not revel in boys' parties, doctor; the noise and commotion would upset her for a week."

"Let her be upset," nearly slipped from the doctor, but he checked himself.

"Would it be possible to have a quiet do?" pondered Muriel thoughtfully. "Bagatelle or draughts, billiards, or something rational. Saturday or Sunday week is your birthday; have you forgotten! The 24th of March, whatever day it

falls on, we shall keep it in our way on the Saturday."

"It is no use, Murry darling, dwelling on the subject," declared Norman gravely. "It will only lead to disappointment. It was a preposterous idea of ours. *N'est, ce pas?*"

"I have a question to put," observed the doctor, "which I require answering. Why do you both say Mrs. Duerdon in everything; do you never consult Mr. Duerdon? and what he likes I am sure you ought to do."

Norman hesitated. He knew why they always deferred to Mrs. Duerdon. Not on account of greater love and respect, merely to save commotion and rows; but he did not wish to say so. He was too loyal to betray family affairs, even to a good friend like Dr. Green.

"Oh, Mr. Duerdon is a man," answered Muriel, finding her brother silent. "He is not so easily disturbed. Mrs. Duerdon is delicate, and her nerves are soon upset."

"Bah, bosh; don't tell me such rubbish," retorted the doctor. "Tell that to your grandmother; as if I do not know better."

His tone was so angry that Muriel feared she had offended him.

"I am sorry you—you mind what—what I said," she stammered.

"Never assert such unfounded statements again then," blustered the good man. "A little down-

right rough, hard work would be the thing for her. Bah, bosh, delicate nerves; ridiculous nonsense."

Muriel opened her eyes wide, but it was not light enough for them to be seen.

Was the world turning upside down, or was Dr. Green right?

The fat pony limped along.

"What day is your birthday?" inquired the doctor.

"The 24th, but I never keep it. Sometimes I get some presents. Had we not better stop now?"

They were near the house.

"Just what I was going to suggest. I am coming in to make a call. Do you not think I shall get a warm reception at this hour of the night? I am getting noted for going everywhere at the wrong time."

"I am afraid Mrs. Duerdon will have retired," said Muriel timidly, fearing to wound the doctor's feelings.

She might have spared herself all anxiety. Dr. Green was not sensitive.

All three entered the drawing-room together.

Mrs. Duerdon was lying back in an easy chair, a lace handkerchief over her face. It fell off as she raised herself.

"You are both dreadfully late," she grumbled peevishly. "This visiting makes you selfish. You

should remember other people have to be considered beside yourself. How do you do, doctor," and she extended her hand.

"Bless my life! do you call this late," exclaimed Dr. Green in surprise. "I thought we had been very good children. We have come to give you an account of our pleasant evening. Should we sit down and relate our proceedings? They will amuse you."

Without waiting for an answer, the good man sat down, signing to his two youthful friends to do the same.

It did not please Mrs. Duerdon.

"Norman and Muriel, you must both go to bed at once," she said angrily. "It is far beyond your usual time. You ought to have known better than show yourselves here at such an hour. You understand that your movements this or any evening bear no interest for me."

The doctor raised his shaggy eyebrows; he began to comprehend something of their situation. No loving interest, no tender sympathy, no expressed anxiety as to their welfare, nothing but complaints and snubs. Was this what "Millicent's children" always got? Was theirs a grand home surrounded by every luxury that money could buy, and yet were they starved for love? were they made to know and feel they were unwelcome? But no, he would not think it; he would not allow himself to think it. He had come at an inoppor-

tune moment. Mrs. Duerdon was tired and cross. Mr. Duerdon was away. Yet as the Vivians advanced, and each held out their hands, Norman openly and frankly, Muriel timidly and shrinkingly as was her way, and the tips of their fingers were only touched in return, an unpleasant thrill ran through the warm-hearted man. Another time in his blunt, straightforward fashion, he might have remarked it openly, but it did not suit his purpose just now.

"My fault, madam, my fault entirely," he said. "I would insist on bringing them in."

Mrs. Duerdon waved her jewelled hand. She meant to imply no apology was necessary; the Vivians were not worth troubling about.

But if Dr. Green's feelings might be guessed by the warmth of his salutation, he did not agree with her in her sentiments. He kissed them very heartily. He felt as if he must clasp the friendless pair closely to him. Were they not the orphaned children of one whom he had fondly loved?

"God bless you, bairns," he uttered with emotion. "Mind you are not long in looking the old man up again."

The door closed behind them.

"Now they are off," he said in a relieved tone, "we can have a nice chat. Where's Duerdon?"

"Gone to bed an hour ago with a tiresome bilious headache. He is subject to them you know."

"Poor fellow; they are nasty things," compassionated the doctor. "I know nothing worse whilst it lasts than a bilious attack. I am glad I looked in; you might have felt dull otherwise."

"No fear of that; it is my bedtime. It knocks me up to keep awake after ten."

Mrs. Duerdon wished to get rid of Dr. Green, and she had no qualms of conscience about making him understand so. Her politeness was not of the kind that cares for another's happiness before her own. She could stay up to any hour when out visiting and it suited her convenience, but to sit unamused at home to please any one else was not her intention.

"It's not too late for me," replied the doctor equably. "This is my time for calling, after the bustle of the day is over. Doctors are not like other people; their time is not their own."

"Ah, it's unfortunate," said Mrs. Duerdon listlessly; "but I feel sure you will excuse me, and defer your visit to another day. If I do not go to bed at ten I am quite knocked up the next day, tired, exhausted, good for nothing."

"Ah!" said the doctor, in no way disturbed by this cool speech, "that is the way it tells on some people. I know a case of"—

"Spare me an enumeration of details," interrupted Mrs. Duerdon quickly; "a horrible case of low life no doubt; spare me, I do not care to listen."

"Ah, I'll spare you," muttered the doctor to himself. "But do not think to get rid of me. One step from this room I shall not budge until my object is accomplished; no, not for you nor for any one."

He had come for a purpose, and all the hints and innuendoes in the world, nay more, not all the plain-speaking would divert him from that purpose. He had no notion of being turned out of any one's house, and so Mrs. Duerdon's remarks glided off him.

Next she tried stratagem, but it was alike useless. All her attempts reminded one of a tiny wave dashing and fretting against a large rock, trying to sweep it away. They were so puny and weak; the doctor so powerful and strong.

Mrs. Duerdon fumed and fumed in vain, arts and darts alike powerless. Her adversary was invulnerable. So wearied and exhausted with the unequal contest, the lady gave way.

"Owen is a pretty child," observed Dr. Green, after a pause.

"He is generally considered so," acknowledged his mother blandly. "Most people admire him. But it astonishes me to hear such an opinion from you, who never admit that good looks are desirable."

"Desirable of course they are. Commendable too in these degenerate days. Better to be born poor than plain, eh; is not that your dictum?"

"Certainly, though poverty is a hideous social disease. Do you think Owen is like me?"

"The strongest resemblance," declared the doctor untruthfully. "Should have known him anywhere. How can you ask?"

Mrs. Duerdon felt flattered.

"I am glad you perceive it, doctor, for though I questioned your appreciation of beauty, I never doubted your keen penetration."

She was gradually and unconsciously falling into the trap set for her destruction. Like a poor fly cajoled by false misrepresentations into a spider's web, Mrs. Duerdon was just as easily flattered into a false view of Dr. Green's intentions and a ready acquiescence in his plans.

"Did you manage to while away your evening pleasantly, or did you find it a dull affair?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, rousing herself to take a little interest.

"Just so-so. Children's parties are a necessary evil. Wise to make the best of them, and take things as they come."

This sentiment was unblushingly offered.

"My opinion, quite," declared Mrs. Duerdon. "Grown-up parties are endurable, but children's parties are a nuisance, a bore, an abomination. I detest them. As Owen gets older he will I suppose require some. Luckily there are a few years for breathing time first."

"You detest parties," echoed Dr. Green in

assumed surprise. "How do you account for such an anomaly as that? You who shine radiant as a star, the cynosure of all eyes, the admired of all beholders."

Mrs. Duerdon simpered.

This was flattery, the sort she hungered for.

"Explain your meaning, madam," continued the medical man. "You cannot mean what you said. Owen, too, is old enough, and well able to enter into fun and amusement; he astonished me to-day. No, madam, no longer must you shirk your responsibilities."

"Ah," rejoined Mrs. Duerdon indifferently, "I daresay Owen enjoyed himself. It was very well for a beginning. Unfortunately there are so few nice children about here for him to mix with. I do not intend him to enter any sort of society."

"I think we can get plenty of tip-toppers for him," laughed the doctor. "Leave it to me; I will find some. It will do him all the good in the world: bring him out, and make a man of him."

"You almost persuade me to give way in spite of my better reason," declared Mrs. Duerdon condescendingly. "The child might enjoy a little companionship. But how about my charms, doctor, would they not be lost on these little people?"

She raised her eyebrows, and looked at Dr. Green.

"So they would," agreed he, as if the thought

had only just struck him. "Ha, ha! I have it. Norman's birthday comes off in ten days or so. Kill two birds with one stone, and arrange for the party to take place then."

"What has Norman to do with the subject in hand," asked the lady coldly. "Norman has become quite the rage lately. I get tired of hearing his name. He is made the beginning and end of everything."

"Ah, say you so?" interrogated the doctor, as if in surprise. "Well, he gets older and more important; I suppose we must bend to these things. If you take my advice, the advice of an elderly man, you will let him have a few friends at the same time."

This was very persuasively and impressively put.

"What ever for?" inquired Mrs. Duerdon in a startled tone.

Dr. Green shook his head knowingly.

"For various reasons. I cannot enter into them all now on account of limited time. I will mention several; let them suffice. First to silence malignant tongues, your hidden charms, and lastly, though not least, acknowledged duty."

"Unacknowledged by me," declared Mrs. Duerdon scornfully.

"True, but not by other people. Tongues will talk, and not always as we would wish them. Be persuaded; you will never regret it."

"Tongues talk," was the peevish reply; "who cares what people say?"

"Not you, nor me," agreed the doctor soothingly. "Still, to a certain point, it is wise to be guided by the world's opinion. We may not live in the world and not be of it."

"What would you advise, then?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, after due deliberation. "Speak on, for I see you mean something by all this talk."

"My strong advice is this. Invite a few of Norman's and Muriel's friends, and let them cultivate acquaintances such as you and Mr. Duerdon would wish them to know. Give Owen's party at the same time. Above all encourage visiting at the Vicarage. It looks well. Also insist on Ernest Mervin becoming a constant visitor."

"Ernest Mervin," echoed Mrs. Duerdon; "you ask a great deal. Why Ernest is one of the stupidest boys who ever lived."

"He certainly is not one of the brightest specimens, but he is a sober, steady, persevering youth, and a good companion for Norman. Dear me! how late it is getting. I must hurry off now. There's no telling how many people may be wanting me. You will think over what I have said."

"Good-night, doctor," replied Mrs. Duerdon affably. "Our pleasant little chat has made the minutes fly. I agree to all you have suggested, but I must beg of you to settle the affair with my husband; such trivial matters worry me."

Well pleased, Dr. Green took his leave.

CHAPTER XV.

The large stable clock struck midnight as the doctor passed it by. He walked soberly until the lodge gates were passed, but when he had gone through them he performed the most extraordinary antics. Had any one seen him they might have wondered had he taken leave of his senses. Dr. Green went on in the wildest way. He a sober staid man of over fifty years. It was unaccountable. He jumped about in every direction. Clapped his hands together over and over again, burst out laughing several times, and finally executed a kind of war dance in the middle of the road. The moon and stars shone over him in placid bewildered astonishment. It was fortunate they were his only witnesses.

"You've been and done it this time, doctor," he said, in a self-laudatory tone, and slapping his leg with vehemence. "Nicely too; you've completely blinded that dressed-up puppet, that conceited woman. Eh, these women, these women, what oddities they are! Only go the right way, and they can be turned round one's fingers. May I be forgiven, too, for all the barefaced falsehoods I uttered. They went sadly against the grain. Her charms, what are they? Bah! they'd go in

a nutshell. Never mind, my boy Norman has gained the day. Hurrah! hurrah! he will have a party."

And round and round the doctor capered.

Mr. Duerdon was greatly surprised when his wife communicated to him the decision at which she had arrived.

"Bravo, Clara," he said, pleased at the suggestion. "The very thing I would have proposed myself, had I thought your health could stand it. We must take every precaution that you do not get knocked up. I should never forgive myself if you became ill."

Mrs. Duerdon felt gratified.

"Thank you, Fred, I am glad to find that I am your first consideration in everything. Show it by sparing me all trouble and fatigue. Enlist Dr. Green's services; he is as strong as a horse."

Mrs. Duerdon meant to amuse herself in arranging a dress suitable for the occasion. It was to be something new and original—a dress that should call forth the doctor's praise. Had he not shown himself a man of discernment, one worthy of shining resplendent in his late conversation?

Mr. Duerdon, obedient to his wife's wishes, called several times on the doctor. That good man was always out. But at last one day Mr. Duerdon went and sat patiently waiting in the little parlour the Vivians loved so dearly. He waited

until the doctor came in, and then the simple arrangements were made. Mr. Duerdon was for doing things on a grand scale, sparing no expense, and giving a party that would redound to the credit and hospitality of Astley Park. This the doctor pooh-poohed; it was unnecessary. Children's parties ought to be conspicuous for simplicity. He wished this to be a commencement of pleasures, and not the beginning and end of them. He would rather the Vivians received a few friends occasionally than give a party, magnificent in its splendour, standing out alone.

About six boys were invited from the Grammar School—six chosen friends of Norman's—boarders, to whom we have not been introduced. Alan Murray and George Atherton came besides. The country round was scoured for eligible little companions for Owen. Sturdy Frank Danvers was kept at the Vicarage a week longer to be present at the great event. Owen flatly declined to be visible if "that nice Frank did not come." Muriel was allowed to have Caroline and a Maud Egerton from Jycliffe, a friend of Mrs. Mervin's. The day fixed for the stir was Saturday, two days before Norman's birthday. Some one suggested it was bad luck celebrating the anniversary of an event before the right time. Norman laughed contentedly; he defied luck. "Was he not fortunate in having his friends at all, no matter about the day."

The day came and passed, as all days do pass—happy or unhappy ones. The eventful evening was a great success. Not boisterously mirthful as at the Vicarage, but quietly and soberly decorous. Norman's friends were pleased at his home and surroundings; they had none of them been aware how large and nice it was. But boys as a rule do not care greatly for show, they care more for fun and mirth, and once they got settled to a quiet game they never noticed the grandeur. Caroline Danvers played and sang to vary the amusement; it was no task to her. Muriel contrived to shirk her duties. She was ashamed to try after such a brilliant performance. Her style was less showy, and there was no fond mother to overcome the shy scruples, and to show her how really well able she was to confer amusement to those around. Norman tried quietly to persuade her. But he was so unselfish and so fearful of giving pain that he soon desisted. The greatest event by far in the evening was Alan Murray's boyish admiration for Mrs. Duerdon. She was magnificently and therefore absurdly dressed, but Alan was well accustomed to splendid clothes, and did not detect the absurdity. He was not aware that ladies were in the habit of dressing plainly for children's parties. It was all right to him. He was quite captivated by her affectation and put-on manners; he thought it was all real, and she quite won his love for the time being. And young as he was

Mrs. Duerdon liked it. Some one, even a boy, was better than no one. She lived for admiration; it was incense to her. Thus Alan in his way unconsciously furthered Dr. Green's scheme more than any one else could have done.

Mrs. Duerdon was pleased with the evening, it was a perfectly new experience to her. She had expected a wearisome toil, a fatiguing hour or two, after the first meeting was over, instead of which she had been agreeably amused. Never afterwards did she raise the least objection to a juvenile party; on the contrary she often proposed one. The house in consequence became much livelier.

Dr. Green had the satisfaction of seeing his intervention on behalf of the Vivians most successful. Visiting amongst each other first at the Park, then the Vicarage, and lastly at Dr. Green's, became a thing of frequent occurrence. Miss Bradshaw even joined in holding out the broom at times, and her small cottage resounded with the sweet voices and merry laughter of youth.

Norman's birthday party was a failure in only one way. The honest-hearted doctor was unavoidably prevented from being present, but he sent a message to say they might expect to see him on Monday. He would come to tea, but they were to make no fuss, he would have it in the nursery.

Monday, the 24th of March, was a lovely day. The sun shone in Norman's eyes when he first awoke. It was like a sunny day in summer, a foretaste of that happy season. He jumped out of bed, and dressed quickly. He feared he was late, and Muriel would be waiting for him. But great as was his hurry he did not shorten his morning prayers. They were never slurred over, never neglected, least of all would he do it on such a day as the anniversary of his birth. Long and earnestly the young boy prayed. Fervently he petitioned for the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction without which none of us can hope to please. Eagerly he implored to be kept from wrong.

A gentle tap came at the door; he heeded it not. It was Muriel; she waited patiently for a minute, and then, as Norman did not come, she peeped in. Seeing him on his knees, she glided silently in and knelt by his side.

It was a nice sight. The two orphans deprived of either parent's fostering care thus seeking for help and grace where alone it is to be found. Two youthful suppliants dependent on others for food and clothing, and for everything that human nature requires, thus early seeking their Father's blessing. Were their parents in heaven permitted to watch over them and guide them in the right path? Were they as guardian angels allowed to lead their offspring gently in the

narrow way? We ask this in all reverence, wondering much on the career of many a destitute orphan child. That they, in spite of bad surroundings, ignorance, and want, often grow up respectable members, good and steady, is a well-proved fact. Is there a hidden influence at work? Is the spirit of the dead father or mother allowed to keep an unerring watch over the desolate child? It might almost seem so in many instances. It is too large an argument to enter into, but if we are inclined to be somewhat imaginative, is there not some excuse?

Norman and Muriel had had but little interest taken in their religious culture. Since their mother's death (and they were mere babies when she died) they had been left to tutors and governesses, not to say to servants. Mr. Duerdon had never cared to hear their prayers. No one had taken pains with them. They went once or twice to church on a Sunday and heard Mr. Mervin preach, and they had picked up the same as other children, until Miss Bradshaw had of her own accord tried to explain the beauty and meaning of our old grand prayers to them. From that time they had become good religious children. They loved to hear of heaven and heavenly things as much as little ones who have been brought up in care and prayerfulness from their earliest infancy. Our Father knows how these things are. He knows best whether in taking away one blessing, He gives another in its place.

The children rose from their knees strengthened. Norman greeted Muriel.

"You are first again this morning, dear Muny; it is ever so. If we are spared for another year, I will try and win."

Muriel did not answer, but tears were in her eyes. She put her hand in her pocket, and drew out a small parcel. This she handed to him.

Norman untied the paper in which it was wrapped, and discovered a morocco case. He opened it. It contained two portraits, small, but beautifully finished. Norman looked at both long and wistfully. It was the portrait of his father and mother.

"You have indeed given me a splendid present this time, Murry, and one that far exceeded my expectations. No words can ever say how greatly I shall prize it. Thanks, my dear sister, many, many times."

Norman closed the case, and again kissed Muriel. She returned the caress lovingly.

"I am glad to have been able to purchase you anything worthy of acceptance," she said simply. "If Mr. Duerdon had not so generously increased our pocket money I should have been puzzled what to get."

"I wish dear papa and mamma were alive Muriel," remarked Norman somewhat wistfully. "How delightful it would be; but it is a selfish wish, they would rather not come back to a world of sin and sorrow."

"Yes, they are far, far better off," echoed Muriel sadly. "There is no doubt on that point, but it is a grievous loss for children to lose their parents."

"The worst of all earthly losses," agreed Norman, "even if their guardians are upright and kind. No love can equal that of a parent."

The day was to be a whole holiday for Norman; this was an understood annual treat. Miss Bradshaw of her own accord gave Muriel the morning, which did not please Mrs. Duerdon. That lady declared it had been her intention to let Muriel have Thursday morning instead. But Muriel instantly offered to relinquish all claim to that day, although it was her own birthday. She preferred being at liberty the same time as Norman was. What good would Thursday be to her wandering about by herself, she would rather be at her lessons.

Directly after breakfast was over Norman asked Muriel how they were to make the most of their freedom.

Muriel pronounced in favour of a long ramble in the woods. When she went to get ready she had to go into the schoolroom for her gloves. And there, on the table, she found a nice edition of the "Christian Year." It was from Miss Bradshaw to Norman. His name was written in the fly-leaf. Muriel in high delight carried it to her brother. He put it in his pocket.

"We may read snatches of it whilst we are out," he observed.

Soon after twelve they wended their way home, after a most enjoyable walk in Astley woods. They were both somewhat tired, though in excellent spirits with each other.

"I would that every morning were like this," uttered Muriel, a shade of regret perceptible in her voice. "It has been so pleasant. What a pity it is all our lives cannot be happy!"

"It will be like this when we are grown up," replied Norman, with boyish hopefulness. "All our days will pass happily then. I often"—

"Oh! Norman," interrupted Muriel eagerly, "there is that beautiful pony again. Look! the man is taking it through the lodge gates. I suppose he wants to prevail on Mr. Duerdon to buy it. Look! is it not a beauty?"

"Perhaps Owen's is going to be changed," observed Norman in excitement. "You are right, it is a splendid creature. Let us hurry on and have a good look at its movements."

Off they both ran in spite of their fatigue. They soon caught the man who was leading it.

"I never saw such a beauty," burst from Norman almost involuntarily. "I did not think a pony could have such a noble appearance."

"Aye, he's a grand 'un, and no mistake," replied the man respectfully, and he touched his cap. "I'm glad you like him, sir, for I believe he's yours."

"Oh, no, you are mistaken," said Norman; "you take me, I daresay, for Master Duerdon—he's a little boy; you will find him at the house."

"This ain't for no Master Duerdon," answered the man grimly. "I know no such name. My orders are to deliver this creetur up to Master Norman Vervain, or some such name."

"Why that's me," declared Norman incredulously, "but I expect no pony, there must be some mistake."

"What you expecs and what you gets is maybe two different things," remarked the man philosophically; "anyways I note to do wi' such things. My orders is, take that to Master Norman Vervain, and I'm a taking it. Is them the stables?"

"Oh, Norman, Norman! don't you see?" exclaimed Muriel in great excitement. "Mr. Duerdon is sorry for your late disappointment, and he has bought this for a birthday present, and as a compensation. I am so glad. Oh, dear! I don't know what to say; there's a great lump in my throat. Oh, Norman, look pleased, and not so bewildered."

And two large tears gathered in the young girl's eyes and fell slowly down her cheeks.

Norman was, however, not as sanguine as his sister. He had learnt caution from past experience.

"It's not for me, Muriel," he replied at once. "You must not get so excited, dear; there is some

mistake. I do not yet know who is in error, but you will find this pretty pony is not for me. Why, Muriel, I should grow quite vain if the beautiful creature were mine. You beautiful pet."

And Norman patted the animal's neck.

"He's plenty of spirit, sir," said the man. "Just call him Sultan, and see how proud he will look."

Norman did as he was desired.

"Sultan, pretty Sultan," he said.

The animal reared its head grandly, and then put it down quite low, feeling for Norman's hand.

"Wants to be stroked, sir; quite accustomed to be petted; takes to you. I guess you will be a good master."

"That I should," replied Norman, "if I owned him."

"Well, if you are Master Vervain, I'll stake my davy he's yours. You see, sir, it's not such a common name. I wish you'd make inquiries, for my time's a bit limited."

"Wait here a moment," exclaimed Norman hurriedly, hope beginning to rise within him. "I will run and ask Mr. Duerdon. It will be a grand present if truly mine."

He ran off, and rushed breathless into the dining-room.

"Have you"—he began, but looking round he perceived the room was empty. "Where can he be? Parkyns, where is your master?"

"He is somewhere in the garden, Master Norman, I believe."

Off bounded Norman as if for his life, each moment in his excitement seeming an hour. After some search he found Mr. Duerdon in the top flower garden.

Without any hesitation he seized hold of his guardian's arm, much to that gentleman's astonishment.

"Have you really, Uncle Fred? Did you?" And Norman paused; he scarcely knew how to frame his sentence. "Come with me at once," he said, "and put me out of this suspense."

Mr. Duerdon stuck his spud in the ground.

"What are you in this state of excitement about?" he demanded. "What has occasioned all your flurry?"

"Oh, come and see," begged Norman again. Mr. Duerdon's cool deliberation and slow movements jarred on the boy's sensibility. "A man has brought such a beautiful pony, Uncle Fred, and he says it is for Master Vivian of Astley Park. Can it be—is it true?"

"Do not allow yourself to be so easily imposed upon, Norman," replied Mr. Duerdon, not over-pleased. "The fellow has made a great mistake. He must be very stupid to come here again. I will send him off."

But when they reached the man he would not be dismissed. He still declared that the pony was for Norman.

"It's for Master Vervain," he repeated, "him that lives here. Them's my orders. I'm not a-going to take him back. Why I should be a rogue, and him paid for."

"Paid for!" echoed Mr. Duerdon, waxing warm. "Well, man, I never paid for him. Surely I know whether I have given you money or not."

"I do not know who giv'd the money, for I was out when Sultan were sold. It wor our Jim who took cash, but I've got it, and that's 'nuff for me. The orders were to take him to Astley Park, and I've brought him, and shall not take him away."

"You are a very rude, persistent fellow," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon in high dudgeon. "Don't you remember hearing the name of the gentleman who paid for the animal, even if you did not see him?"

The man gave a knowing wink.

"Now, sir, you are a-getting sensible. In course our Jim told me your name; I wonder you never axed me before. Yes, he said it were White, or Black, or Green, or something o' that sort. It wor some colour; you'll know best."

"That shows your mistake then," declared Mr. Duerdon triumphantly. "My name is neither White nor Black, but Duerdon—Frederick Duerdon, Esq.—so, fellow, you can go."

The man looked puzzled, crestfallen. But a

bright light shone on Norman's face. He stood with lips half parted, his breath coming hurriedly, and Muriel reflected his delight.

"I think the young gent can explain," said the horse-dealer quickly. "He looks as if he understood summat."

"Nonsense, man," persisted Mr. Duerdon irritably. "Why will you not listen to reason? This young gentleman has no friend to look after him and buy him expensive presents save myself. I have not bought the animal, so take it away without any more words."

"Well, sir, it's a strange business, and I mun do your bidding," said the man, scratching his head in bewilderment. "I'll go, but if I don't have to come back my name's not David Jenkyns."

He turned to go, and then they all perceived Dr. Green coming at a great rate down the Park. He was quite out of breath when he reached them.

"Ah, I'm late I fear. You were pretty punctual, Jenkyns," he said to the man. "I thought I should have been here first."

And the doctor took off his hat and mopped his head.

"Was you the gent that paid our Jim?" asked Jenkyns in astonishment. "Why, sir, if I'd only a-known it might have saved a bit of bother. We've been a arguing a bit."

"It's all right," declared the doctor. "I

bought it as a present for this young gentleman —a pleasant surprise. Jump on him, Norman, and have a ride. He's yours, my boy, your very own, a present from the blunt old doctor. Duerdon, you'll forgive me; I've forestalled you. But the lad is as my own son; you must let me give him this."

The magnanimity of the doctor's present quite overpowered Mr. Duerdon. He could scarcely speak, and there was a suspicious moisture about his eyes.

"Green, how could you?" he said at last; "how could you? You put me quite to the blush by such generosity. I cannot think what to say, but of course he must not accept it."

"And why not, pray?" demanded the doctor, turning suddenly round. "Do you want to go and pay the man yourself? No, not if I know it. Do you suppose no one has any spare cash but yourself? I never made a purchase that gave me greater pleasure. I was delighted when I found the creature was not sold. I wish to prove my love and honour for your step-sister's child by a small present. Many happy returns of the day, my boy; may you ever deserve every present you receive as much as you deserve this."

Norman was speechless. His burden of gratitude was so heavy he could scarcely carry it. Sultan was such a glorious gift, the very thing he would have desired beyond all others. He had

had no hope of it, and now it had come so unexpectedly. To look at his face few would have guessed the inward tumult. Muriel understood him.

"Norman is so overjoyed," she said, "so pleased at your munificent gift that he does not know what to do."

"Jump on Sultan, then, and be off," exclaimed the doctor. "He is yours, saddle, bridle, and all. Off with you." And he helped the bewildered boy towards the pony.

On leaped Norman with a few incoherent words of thanks, and off flew Sultan.

"Will you give me lunch?" asked Dr. Green. "It will save my returning home. I have Bristow's farm to visit, and I feel hungry."

"By all means," responded Mr. Duerdon heartily. "Luncheon will be ready; my wife will be pleased to see you, and she likes punctual hours."

Down deep in both their hearts was a dread and a wonder as to how Mrs. Duerdon would receive Norman's good fortune. They would neither of them have owned to the feeling, but Dr. Green thought it would be as well for him to be present, and see what reception the announcement obtained. They all three went in the hall together, and there Norman joined them, after one delightful gallop. He had not entirely recovered his emotion yet.

"I have to thank you, doctor, with all my heart," he said, speaking huskily, "and I do not seem able to find words to do so. I do not know what to say; I feel"—

"Tut, tut," interrupted Dr. Green, touched by the boy's gratitude. "No thanks are necessary; your face expresses enough. If I want any reward I shall have it in seeing you ride backwards and forwards to school every day. Mind you do not get too proud to look me up, eh, Norman? I shall be able to joke you again in real earnest now, eh?"

And the doctor gave Norman a poke in the ribs.

Owen was seated in the high chair near his mamma at the lunch table. He never made any demur about it now, but he looked very shy when the doctor patted him on his head. Mrs. Duerdon received the party somewhat coolly. The gong had failed to bring them in, and that always excited her ire. Mr. Duerdon waited for her mood to improve before he ventured to inform her of Dr. Green's generosity. She received the news blandly.

"Of course you sent the animal back."

"Back!" blustered the doctor, half choking in his eagerness. "Bless my life, madam, what should Duerdon send it back for?"

"It will require attention from the men, food, and"—

"Undoubtedly it will—an undisputed fact. Madam, you are right. It is an inferior animal,

and cannot live on air. Mrs. Duerdon, you display singular penetration and sagacity."

The lady did not like these sarcastic cuts, jokingly given as they were. She fidgeted, but still she kept to her text.

"I mean what I say," she declared. "Who is going to feed the animal?"

"Why, Clara, one of the stable men of course," answered her husband. "There will be no difficulty. Douglas will see about it."

"I did not inquire who would actually put the food to the pony's mouth," returned Mrs. Duerdon coldly. "That, as you say, is easily done. What I want telling is who is to pay for its food?"

"Nunkey pays all," laughed Mr. Duerdon good-humouredly.

Norman's face fell; he had never thought about its keep.

"Norman had better pay," observed the doctor ironically.

He had noticed the expression on the boy's countenance.

"Of course that would be the proper thing if he had any money," said Mrs. Duerdon, slightly mollified, "but he has none."

"Oh, Mrs. Duerdon," put in Norman eagerly, "there is my pound a month. I could spare fifteen shillings or more of it."

"And you may have ten shillings of mine," offered Muriel freely.

"All of which comes from Mr. Duerdon," de-

clared the lady coldly. "You two young people seem utterly devoid of sense. Your mother, I believe, left a small sum, enough, doubtless to feed a pony."

Norman's face flushed sensitively.

"Mamma left a great deal more than sufficient to feed one animal," exclaimed Muriel hotly; "you know she did."

"Let some of it be spent then," urged Norman gently. "She would have wished it so, I am sure."

The boy's meekness struck home to the doctor's heart.

"Tut, tut," he said, wiping his eyes suspiciously. "Mr. Duerdon intends keeping your pony at his own cost. If there is the least hesitation about it three homes are already offered in the village. Norman is so great a favourite. Two of the farmers offered to give it a home, and John, my man, was quite indignant that I would not offer it a stall. He said he would be proud to wait on Master Norman. It shall go back to my place if you will let it, Duerdon."

But this was not what Mrs. Duerdon wanted. It would never do, for the say of the thing, to let any one else keep it, or else in very meanness she would have snatched at the offer. She did not even yet want Norman to possess the pony.

"If Sultan lived at your place," questioned Norman, "and I paid for his keep, he could still be mine?"

"Of course he would; no one can take him from you. There is no doubt as to whom he belongs, only as to whom is to feed him."

Mrs. Duerdon's countenance changed.

"I suppose, as usual, doctor, you will have your way. The pony will have to stop here," uttered Mrs. Duerdon sulkily. "Only if he comes off on the shorts do not blame me. To my mind it seems enough to be saddled with other people's children without having their animals to feed."

"Ah, madam, we shall have to dip into that large account of yours at the banker's," said the doctor lightly.

He was anxious if possible to change the subject, and alter her mood. He succeeded.

"No one with any sense could expect me to part with any of that," she uttered with animation. "It will be Owen's. Norman and Muriel can have no claim on me."

"Decidedly not," assented the doctor. "They must be some one else's care. Ascertain that Norman's pony is well cared for, or I shall sue you for damages."

The doctor spoke lightly, but there was a depth of meaning in his tone apparent to the Vivians if no one else remarked it.

"You are utterly incorrigible, Dr. Green," declared Mrs. Duerdon, and the conversation became general.

CHAPTER XVI.

At six o'clock that same evening Dr. Green arrived at Astley Park to tea. He had left directly after lunch, and only came back to fulfil his promise. His expressed wish that tea should be taken in the nursery was not attended to. It was set in state in the dining-room, a high tea as Mrs. Duerdon termed it. No light compliment was paid to the doctor in that dinner was given up on his account. But Dr. Green was no small favourite.

"Now, this is what I call too bad," remonstrated he. "I never meant to be made a visitor of," and he lifted Owen on to his strong shoulder. "What do you think of such behaviour, Master Owen?"

"Gee up, donkey," said Owen.

They all laughed, and off raced the kind doctor round and round the room to the child's intense delight.

"How fearfully strong you must be," said Mrs. Duerdon, as the things rattled about in every direction. "I should think you will live to be ninety at the very least." Mrs. Duerdon sighed pathetically at such a prospect.

"I'm quite willing," responded the doctor. "Life is sweet, it holds many charms for me, and the days pass away very quickly. Each

year I verily believe passes quicker than the last. I am ready to live so long as God will let me."

"I sincerely trust that will be for many years," returned Mrs. Duerdon, politely. "You would be sorely missed. There is a saying that some one is ready to fill every one's place—I hardly think one would be found to fill yours."

An interruption came, Norman and Muriel entered the room together. Norman's face was bright and sparkling. Muriel had a pretty bunch of white and purple violets fastened at her throat. They were a present from Norman; he often gathered her some; she liked them much. Their sweet perfume scented the room.

"One of your own sort, Muriel," said the doctor, making a grab at them. He often called her a violet, and it was a compliment she was pleased to hear. She coloured slightly at Mrs. Duerdon hearing it, but she unloosed the violets and held them up to the doctor. He sniffed at them, then turned to Norman—

"Have you been riding this afternoon?" he asked.

"I have," was the ready reply, "and have enjoyed my outing beyond all expression. Dr. Green, I thank you hundreds of times for your grand present. What a splendid saddle it is too."

"Ah, you must thank somebody else for that. The pony was enough for my pocket."

"Fie, fie, doctor," reproved Mrs. Duerdon."

"It was you who bought them all, and nobody else," uttered Muriel, with decision. "At least, that's my firm opinion."

"Muriel," said the doctor, turning to her suddenly, and startling her, "when is your birthday?"

"On Thursday next," she answered quietly.

"Thursday," repeated Dr. Green. "Come, come, that's too good. That will never do. Norman would only have been three days old when you were born."

"One year and three days," corrected Muriel.

"Ah, that will do better, but it's far too bad of you, young lady, to have a birthday so soon after your brother."

"Why?" she asked, in surprise.

"Oh, you must put it off," grunted the doctor. "My ship will never have come in."

She laughed, highly amused.

"Your ship," she repeated, "you must be joking, it is only little children who talk about such things."

"Nevertheless, I am quite serious, and if my ship does not come I shall have no money to buy you a present with."

The young girlish face became very grave.

"Please do not jest about such things," she beseeched, with great earnestness. "I am more pleased than I can say with your magnificent present to Norman; it has delighted me much—far better than anything you could have sent me.

After such liberality I could not think of accepting a gift from you. Please do not question my word not if twenty ships arrived."

"Decidedly not," interrupted Mrs. Duerdon, with unusual warmth, "I shall not permit your generosity to be so tasked. Muriel has everything she requires."

"Humph! You mean what you say?" asked the doctor, addressing Muriel, and passing over Mrs. Duerdon's speech.

"In all sincerity. Earnestly from my heart."

"You shall not have anything then," exclaimed Dr. Green, loudly. "If you are too proud I'll give you nothing. Another year, when I have recovered from the great drain on my pocket, we'll see what can be done."

"Doctor, you are laughing at us," declared Norman.

"Muriel will be satisfied with good wishes," interposed Mrs. Duerdon. "She has no friends. It will be something for her if she gets those."

"Hers is a condition that we are all in, I greatly fear," spoke up the sturdy old doctor. "I speak from experience. Muriel has as many friends if not more than I have. In fact I have been growing jealous of her lately, she is winning so many hearts from me." He saw large tears welling in the girl's eyes, and he felt sorry.

"Muriel deserves a great many," said Norman, dauntlessly. "She is so unselfish, and she prefers

that every one should be put before herself. I never knew any one like Muriel."

"Every one in this instance, meaning yourself," laughed Mrs. Duerdon, unpleasantly, "we all understand the ridiculous infatuation you have for each other. Here, pass this cup down."

They were sitting round the table. At this juncture Owen upset his mug; it was a fortunate diversion. Mr. Duerdon came in. Muriel afterwards told Norman that Dr. Green knocked Owen's arm purposely. It is probable she was right. The doctor was equal to the occasion; and in making Owen the scape-goat he used his usual discretion. Whether she was right or not Dr. Green made enough fuss and commotion over it. He jumped up in assumed consternation, to the threatened destruction of all the cups and saucers on the tray. Mr. Duerdon was totally discomposed, and could not make out what all the ado was about, and a servant hurried in in indecorous haste to answer the violent ringing of the bell. Mrs. Duerdon was glad to retire from the table immediately tea was ended; the unusual stir had exhausted her energies. "Owen was not old enough to sit with them," was all the remark she made on his accident. A quiet evening followed. They played bagatelle in the hall, all of them with the exception of Owen and his mother. As Norman was walking down the passage to his room for the night, he heard his name uttered softly.

"Norman, Norman." He looked back and saw Muriel beckoning to him. She was standing near the schoolroom door. He went to her at once.

"Why did you run after me?" he asked. "I might not have heard you, and then you would have thought me unkind."

"I was afraid Major or some of the servants would meet me and send me back," replied Muriel. "Then it would have had to be told what my errand was. Look here," she said, lifting up her apron. "Is not this nice?" She had a round Sultana cake. "You know when I went to see Martha this afternoon, whilst you had your ride, when you got me those violets, you recollect, don't you?"

Norman nodded.

"Well, Nor, she gave it me then as a present for you."

"I am quite in luck's way," laughed Norman. "We will put it on the nursery tea-table to-morrow night."

"That is just what she begged you would not do," said Muriel. "She is afraid of criticism in such a large house as this. She is none of your fancy cooks with sal-volatile and rubbish. Those were her words."

"Very ambiguous," laughed Norman. "What could she have meant? Never mind, she is a kind-hearted soul, and her cakes beat our cook's into fits. I tell you what we will do. Suppose we take it to Widow Clegg, it would be a treat to her."

"A famous suggestion, if you would not like it at school, Norman."

"No," he deliberated, "it would be like a needle in a bottle of hay. How good it looks. Murry poor Widow Clegg will enjoy it."

"Oh, Norman, if you think it looks good keep it for yourself," entreated Muriel. "Martha would be so proud."

Norman laughed. "I only meant it looked nice for Mrs. Clegg. Good-night, Muny."

"Good-night, Norman," said Muriel, returning her brother's kiss; and then she stood and watched him down the passage. "Good-night, my bonny brave brother," she cried, "may God bless you for ever and ever, and may He give me more of your gentle spirit, with your noble winning ways; may He watch over us both and bring us to His heavenly kingdom."

Muriel's birthday passed as quietly as any ordinary day. It was too soon after Norman's for any especial notice to be taken of it, even had there been any intention of such a proceeding. She was not forgotten, but on the contrary, was rather fortunate in presents.

Miss Bradshaw brought her a copy of the "Christian Year," similar to the copy she had given Norman. Mr. Duerdon presented her with a beautiful album, a joint present, he said, from himself and his wife, though Muriel guessed, and correctly, that Mrs. Duerdon had nothing to do

with it. Owen found a large shell a great treasure which some one had once given him, and begged she might have it. Norman bought her a beautiful writing-desk, nicely inlaid, her initials, "M.V.," prettily engraved on the lid. It was a possession Muriel had long wished for. Spence, not wishing to be behind the rest, purchased a thimble for Muriel's acceptance. She had heard Muriel had lost her own. The young girl was very pleased; she had spent all her pocket-money on Norman's present, and had not been able to make up for her loss. No present came from Dr. Green. He had taken her at her word. Muriel had almost feared he would not, and felt relieved.

Easter arrived, and with it a few days of holiday, fully enjoyed by both the Vivians. Nothing could check the pleasure they found in each other's society. Summer, with its sunny days, its lovely flowers, and singing birds came. The air was fragrant with the syringa and heliotrope. The bees hummed and buzzed, and all around seemed gay. Norman and Muriel were quietly happy, their lives rippled quietly along. For some months everything had gone peacefully. No internal jars or disputes, no petty jealousies and spites; all had been still; or the wind had been so calm it scarce raised a passing breeze. It was within a week of the Grammar School holidays. Muriel's vacations were always fixed for the same time, and they looked forward to an unusual period of liberty.

Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon were going to Scarborough for a month, Owen was accompanying them. Some of the servants were to be taken, Spence amongst the number. Norman and Muriel were to be left behind, and they gloried in the prospect of freedom. It was Saturday afternoon, and the Vivians were sitting in a beautifully shaded part of the garden discussing the subject.

"I shall not be sorry when they are gone," admitted Muriel. "It will be a change, and changes are always for the best."

"I doubt that," reasoned Norman, more practical just then in his sentiments. "I should not care for any change that took us from this charming spot at this season. I enjoy everything here so thoroughly."

"Not even our long-talked-of visit to the dear doctor's."

"No, Muriel, not even that; I would rather go at Christmas when we have the long winter evenings. They are so snug and cosy at his house, whilst at home we often find them wearisome when there are no lessons to prepare."

"Do you not think Nor, it would be very nice to be there now," questioned Muriel.

"Not as nice as here; we should feel stifled, cooped up in his small rooms these hot summer days, and miss the beautiful garden and surroundings. We could scarcely breathe, whilst here the air is most pure and fresh."

"I think you are right," deliberated Muriel, slowly. "It must be a great loss to the doctor having no garden worth mentioning to stray about in."

"He would scarcely have time to enjoy it if he had, his practice is so large. Who is that coming? It's Caroline Danvers; should we go and meet her?"

"I suppose we must," replied Muriel, jumping up. "It's rather a nuisance on your half-holiday though."

Caroline had stayed all this time with her grandparents at the Vicarage, principally on account of singing lessons. She and Muriel learnt from the same celebrated Italian master, a Signor Tolli. He came over once a week from Jycliffe. The two girls had become pretty good friends, though Muriel was not so fond of Caroline's companionship as to welcome her very warmly on Norman's half-holiday.

"Alan Murray has walked over with one of the boarders," said Caroline, after they had exchanged civilities, "and grandma has sent me to bring you both back to tea. I met Mrs. Duerdon in the large carriage, and she gave permission for you both to come."

"We shall be very happy, shall we not, Murry? I wanted to have a quiet chat with Alan, one never gets a chance of such a thing at school. Alan is my principal opponent—that is in the way of

studies. I am going in for the exhibition," he explained, "so a formidable opponent like he is to be dreaded."

"It's a very low business, is it not?" questioned Caroline. "Alan will not try for the money; his father is too rich. We often wonder why he is left at Jycliffe instead of being sent to a grand school. His parents are both aristocratic and wealthy."

"Alan will not *try* for anything," laughed Norman, amused at Caroline's views of the exhibition. "Exertion of every kind is distasteful to him. All that comes must come easily or not at all. He has great natural abilities. I often envy him. I"—

"Why, he has just been saying that you beat him into fits," exclaimed Caroline, in surprise.

Norman flushed. "That is merely because I work much harder," he answered modestly. "I fear if he studied as much as I do, the tables would be reversed."

"You two can walk on slowly to the park gates," said Muriel, "and I will overtake you. My dress wants a little titivating, and I must exchange my large summer hat for something a little respectable. Perhaps, though, Caroline, you would like to walk in and rest."

Caroline declined. Muriel laughingly kissed her hand and ran in the house. Upstairs went she as fast as she could to adorn herself. She got two pieces of bright blue ribbon and put them on, one

at the end of her long plaid of hair, another in the locket—Dr. Green's present—round her throat. In her small leather dressing-case was Norman's Mizpah ring. She had stolen it from him some days before in fun, and so far he had not missed it. That she slipped on, and with a hasty smoothing of her hair and a wash of her hands Muriel's toilet was completed. She looked fresh and nice, and was quite satisfied with the few minutes' hasty adornment. A short run, and she soon overtook Norman and Caroline; they had been dawdling for her. Alan Murray was not able to give Norman the information he needed, but promised to get it some evening after school hours without fail. He kept his word later on, and found out that the sum of £50 a year was allowed for four years at St. John's College, Cambridge, and that the scholar must obtain the exhibition before reaching the age of eighteen, though he could not go to College until that time. The money was given to the head boy in the school. If he did not desire it it was passed on to the second boy, and so on. If four declined its advantages, as had frequently been the case, no one could obtain the exhibition for another year. Norman felt quite satisfied when he heard the rules. For supposing Alan should be first he would not accept it; his father was in too good a position to render such a step desirable, or allowable even, as it was left to the sons of poor gentlemen. Norman would be no lower than second, presuming even he was that. Alan laughed

at the bare notion. Norman was miles before him, he said. "I have only one other fear," observed Norman, "which is this. Suppose another boy, a clever one, should enter the school merely for the sake of winning the exhibition."

"No harm if one did," answered Alan, "as whoever gains the £50 must have been here for three years and over. So if one entered his name at once it would not interfere with your chance. Norman," he said, in a lower tone, "excuse my asking you, but what is your motive for going in for the scholarship? I should have thought your position would have rendered you too proud. Surely, Vivian, it is a whim only."

The question was kindly put, delicately even, in its gentleness, but Norman coloured; the sensitive crimson mounted to his temples.

"I think it is because I am proud," replied Norman, "that I am anxious to obtain it. If it were not for this very pride I should be less ambitious—more contented to take things as they are. Just think what is my position, Murray! It's simply nil. I am worse off than any boy in the school. An orphan, a dependant responsible for every crust of bread I eat, on the bounty of others. I have no positive claim on any one; my position at Astley Park, save for Mr. Duerdon's kindness, worse than that of the hired servants, for they work for their bread, whilst I do nothing but require money and care bestowed on me. What are my prospects?"

"Good enough, old fellow," replied Alan, kindly. "Many would like to be in your place. Mr. Duerdon is well off, and he will take care that you get a good start in life."

"Granted Mr. Duerdon is all kindness, but what should I be doing to render help necessary when a famous opportunity such as this presents itself. Why, Murray, it almost seems to me that I should be wicked to let it slip by. No, I must make the most of the talents God has endowed me with, perhaps for this very purpose; who knows? You think me lacking in pride; never think so again. I have plenty of the right sort, I hope. After all," he said, laughing, and trying to throw off the uncomfortable feeling that possessed him, "I do well to be proud. I am the son of as good a gentleman as ever lived. For his sake, if for nothing else, I shall strive to gain laurels in the future."

"This is the first time I have heard your father's merits alluded to," remarked Alan. "Every one speaks of your mother. Over and over again people have called you both 'Millicent's children.' She must have been a lovable woman from all accounts."

"She was," agreed Norman, warmly. "The reason papa is not mentioned is because he was a stranger here, whilst mamma spent the principal part of her life at Astley."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FEW more days, and school broke up. The Duerdons and their numerous retinue went off to the seaside. Owen cried at leaving the Vivians, and would not be comforted until the carriage drove off. His display of affection irritated Mrs. Duerdon. She did not wish him to care for any one. Now what a delightful time commenced for Norman and Muriel. Never before had they experienced anything like it, unless, perhaps, their pleasant visit to Cherry Cottage. What rest! what freedom from restraint! Everything was in their favour, warm sunny days, long cool, shady evenings, kind friends, rides, drives, visiting, and above all and beyond, each other's society. It was a time of simple unalloyed happiness. Norman rode beautiful Sultan daily. The pretty creature knew and recognised his master. Muriel amused herself whilst Norman was out by practising assiduously. Then on his return what lots he would have to tell! what rambles they had. Then their bright conversations, full of hope for the future. How grand it was to be far beyond even the sunny present. Norman wreathed many a bouquet of summer flowers over Muriel's head whilst they sat about in meadows

carpeted with buttercups and daisies, but he wove no crown so gorgeous as the bright hopes he entertained of the time that was to come, the untried, the unknown future. He was to rise, rise, rise. All was to be success and prosperity; not one dark cloud was to overshadow his horizon. No height was too giddy for him to attain. Muriel followed in these wild flights of fancy. Less imaginative in worldly things, she once made some slight demur.

"There are so few attain to such glory," she gently asserted.

"All the greater the honour when attained," laughed Norman, no way crushed by his sister's practicability.

There is no time like youth, so sanguine, hopeful, and buoyant. The dark days come as we grow older. Hope, the bright, gracious queen who has led us through the easiest pathways, suddenly leaves us; without one word of warning she has fled. Despair, the gaunt giant, rudely pushes her away, and like a blind man cherishing pebbles which he fondly believes to be diamonds, we hug the grim foundling to us instead of strangling the foul creature at its birth. Oh that when we find our mistake we could as easily cast the monstrosity away as the blind man throws away his diamonds. Dark and dreary are the older years to some of us. God grant it is not so to all.

One afternoon during the holidays Mrs. Mervin

called. This was an important event. It was only on the rarest occasions, as has been before stated, that she visited Astley Park. Her round of calls extended more amongst the neighbouring clergy and their wives, though she was not really fond of formal visiting anywhere; she liked best to visit her own poor people. Norman was lying down on the sofa when she was announced—the dining-room sofa, Mrs. Duerdon's favourite resting-place. Muriel, in an easy chair not far off, was fast asleep, her head thrown back, her unplaited hair falling down around her. They both wakened and started up with pleasure as Mrs. Mervin was shown in. The opening of the door had disturbed Muriel.

"Good-afternoon, dears," said the kind-hearted woman, holding out a hand to each. "How cruel of me to disturb you this hot afternoon. The fact is I got ready for a drive into Jycliffe on important business, and our man never found out the horse was lame until we were ready to start, so as I had my things on, I thought I would look you up."

"As thoughtful as ever," said Norman, with a smile. Then quickly, "Could you manage to go in our pony phaeton? It is, perhaps, better than nothing. It is entirely at your disposal, for Mr. Duerdon left strict orders we could use it whenever we pleased."

"You are very kind," said Mrs. Mervin, "but I fear I was scarcely included in that category. Mrs.

Duerdon might think, considering the terms we are on, that I had been presumptuous."

"She would not think anything of the kind," added Muriel, "as Mrs. Duerdon was also anxious that the pony should have plenty to do. The oftener it is used the better. That notion alone reconciled her to letting us have it. Norman and I were talking of going to Jycliffe."

"Oh, if you meant to go, that quite alters the case," said Mrs. Mervin, quickly. "My taking a seat in your carriage is perfectly allowable, but your ordering the pony out for me is another thing;" and Mrs. Mervin laughed a merry little laugh. Her thoughts seemed to amuse her. "Come, Norman, let's be off as soon as possible," said the active little woman, jumping up in her usual quick style; "the sooner we are off the better. Who will you take for the fourth, Ernest or Caroline? They will both wish to come."

"They can both go," declared Muriel, eagerly. "I only wished to go because Norman would have been lonely without me, and now that you are all there I can easily be spared. I have my singing lesson to practise; Signor Tolli begged me to prepare it carefully."

Norman, who had been to see after the pony phaeton returned.

"What is it you are saying about a singing lesson?" he inquired, out of breath. "Those exercises of yours are perfect, Miss Muriel. No

fibs. You are not going to be left behind, however much you desire it, is she, Mrs. Mervin? Run upstairs and get ready; Douglas will be here in a minute. He was going on his own account. I met him coming to ask if there was any order to execute for us."

"If you want to study your singing lesson, Muriel, the same thing can be said for Caroline—she ought to prepare hers; so that is no excuse," observed Mrs. Mervin, merrily.

"No excuses are needed," said Norman. "The heat is too great for me, so all can go."

"Now, Norman," laughed Muriel, "that is the richest thing of all. We can see through your imposition as easily as if you had told us what you meant. It is no good; I shall not go and leave you lonely at home. That arrangement will"—

"What need to waste time in discussing rubbish?" interrupted Mrs. Mervin, decisively. "It is kind of you to be unselfish, but it is not necessary. You both drive to Jycliffe, or I most certainly shall not go. Ernest shall stay at home; he will not mind."

"He never minds anything," observed Norman; "everything comes right to him."

"Just so," replied his mother; "he is a dear, good boy. We are all right in our different ways," added she contentedly.

"Must I drive, Muriel?" asked Norman, putting on gloves.

"Oh, please do."

"Well, here's off," he said. "Now then."

Caroline was delighted to be of the party. She was a young lady who found difficulty in getting rid of her time. Ernest declared he could not have gone even if he had wanted; his father had given him some copying to do. Ernest was strictly truthful. Moreover, he was not ready at framing excuses; he was not quick enough. Every one believed him, and was happy. Mrs. Mervin had a great deal of shopping to do. It was wonderful how many shops she entered, and she had a kind word for every one. No little act of attention was beneath her notice; she always had a smile and a word of thanks. It is wonderful how people like this make friends. The kindly hearted lady was welcomed everywhere. No matter what customers the shopkeeper was attending to, he always left them to see that Mrs. Mervin was waited on immediately even if he could not stay to serve her himself. The lots of small parcels she purchased was marvellous. She quite blushed as the heap got larger and larger, and laughingly excused herself by saying she so seldom visited a town.

Mrs. Mervin gave her three companions each a small parcel to hold, of which she cautioned them to take particular care. She took them into the principal confectioner's, and treated them all to something dainty and tempting. She never thought of herself; her happiness was ensured in studying

other people's wishes. On reaching home all her parcels were found to contain presents for those around or useful things for the house. Even the three little parcels she had entrusted to her young friends were gifts for themselves. All were books. "Queechey," which was Norman's, was unanimously pronounced the nicest. Ernest was not forgotten.

"It strikes me very forcibly," remarked Mr. Mervin, putting a large quantity of quills on the table, newly purchased from Jycliffe—"it strikes me that you have, as usual, remembered every one but yourself. Is it not so? I cannot see one article the least suitable for you."

Mrs. Mervin looked bewildered.

"I feel sure I ordered something for myself," she deliberated. "Ah, yes," clapping her hands in ecstasy. "I have it. There is a new headdress coming from Miss Schofields."

There was a general laugh at this. Mrs. Mervin's little weakness was so well-known.

"It has been a mystery to me for many years," remarked her husband, when the merriment had subsided; "and a mystery that I confess has mastered me, why all, or, at any rate, nearly all, ladies think so much of adorning their heads. It seems such a distinctive feminine failing. Pass by a milliner's shop, whenever you may, it is invariably besieged with eager women spectators, admiring the beauties displayed there."

"George! I am surprised at you," rebuked Mrs. Mervin. "I should never have thought you noticed such things; you are generally so quiet."

"And, grandpapa, it shows what taste ladies have," put in Caroline. "All the fashions are in a milliner's window;" and the girl tossed her head in importance.

"Why is their taste wasted in one way?" resumed the vicar, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, which no one but Muriel caught. "Why do they not divide it into certain portions, and some cultivate a love for one thing and some for another? How few women, taking the great masses, care for good paintings, beautiful scenery, lovely colouring, or the numerous things taste can be expended on. Now, Caroline," mischievously pursued the vicar, "you notice, for the future, if my speech is not a well-considered one, judging by the multitudes, and not counting exceptions."

"I do not quite think you are right," dissented Norman, diffidently. "I always think ladies have such excellent taste."

"Well done, Norman; one to us," said Mrs. Mervin, delighted. "You are a famous champion, we must enlist your services. Shake hands over it."

This was done with becoming gravity.

"George, I am surprised at you," again rebuked she. "I scarcely thought you entertained such heretical notions."

It was nine o'clock when the Vivians returned home, their books under their arms. Their pony phaeton had returned to Astley Park long before. The Mervins' manservant had driven it home directly the lively party had got back from Jycliffe. So in the evening's cool they walked together quietly. Thus passed the time until the Duerdons returned. All the holidays were pleasant, the servants were attentive and civil, the housekeeper was profuse in her anxieties that the Vivians should be well cared for. She discharged her responsibilities in a highly creditable way. Neither disagreeably prominent nor negligently backward was she. There was not a single flaw anywhere. Douglas was most respectful, and both Norman and Muriel comforted themselves as became their position, as was to be expected from high principled natures such as were theirs. Some children or young people strictly trained break away into all sorts of foolish doings, errors, and absurdities, directly all restraint is withheld. But not so the Vivians; they knew if their guardians were absent that there was still One eye watching over them. They might have given much trouble. They could have given orders of all kinds; they might have been overbearing and rebellious—dictatorial and exacting; instead of which it was their great aim to be on their very best behaviour, as a kind of return to Mr. Deurdon for giving them a home. Each day brought some little change,

some little event to prevent the time hanging on their hands. They were quietly, yet not monotonously happy; and it was with feelings of regret they saw the weeks one after another slip so rapidly out of their grasp. Norman resumed his studies cheerfully—he was a bright boy, and never gave way to despondency. Muriel was different; perhaps she was not altogether to be blamed. When her brother went back to school she was companionless, whereas Norman had plenty of playfellows. She felt dull, and barely accorded a proper amount of cordiality to her reception of Miss Bradshaw. The governess noticed this, but with a large-heartedness worthy of praise did not resent it. She noted the weary, listless manner; the absent answer, and the cold tone; but it did not displease her. She pitied where many would have blamed. Her sympathy was freely shown, when others would only have bestowed censure. She had a project in her head which, if successful, would prove beneficial to Muriel and profitable to herself. She would never have matured it had not the loneliness of the orphan girl called forth all her courage.

During the holidays Mrs. Mervin had suggested the following plan for her consideration:—Caroline's education, since she had been at the Vicarage, with the exception of singing, had been totally neglected; and Mrs. Mervin was considering the advisability of engaging a governess, when

the thought struck her, what a nice thing it would be for all parties if Miss Bradshaw could teach both Muriel and Caroline, either at the Vicarage or the Park, which ever was most convenient. Mrs. Mervin had a great respect for Miss Bradshaw. The only obstacle and difficulty in the whole concern was naming it to Mrs. Duerdon and gaining her consent. No one was willing to do this. Mrs. Mervin declared she would not. Mr. Mervin, in his quiet way, joked her, and said she was growing a shy old woman; what had she to fear in Mrs. Duerdon? He urged her to go, but in vain. The offer had been a great temptation to Miss Bradshaw. She was not well off, and money was an object. Mrs. Mervin, who was the soul of generosity, had not stinted for salary; she had offered to give the same as Mrs. Duerdon did. Thus Miss Bradshaw's morning salary would be at once doubled, while her afternoons would still be her own for music pupils. But yet with all advantages Miss Bradshaw declined to negociate. It was a pity no one was brave enough to beard the lion in his den, for Mrs. Mervin was willing to let Caroline go daily to the Park if Mrs. Duerdon preferred that plan, or she would welcome Muriel right gladly to the Vicarage. In fact she was willing to submit to almost any arrangement that would be for every one's good, and she left the affair for a few weeks in abeyance, trusting that Miss Bradshaw would decide to consult the lady at

Astley Park. And as it turned out, Mrs. Mervin proved wise in her calculations.

As the days passed on, and Muriel did not recover her wonted spirits, Miss Bradshaw determined to try what effect an appeal might have—an appeal on Mrs. Duerdon, not on Muriel. It was with a sinking heart and small hopes of success she placed the proposition in its most attractive form. Even at the last moment she almost wavered before knocking at the door of the boudoir, but as she conscientiously argued, her going could be productive of no harm, even supposing no good result accrued. Had Miss Bradshaw been asked why she exhibited so much nervousness, it might have puzzled her to answer. Perhaps it was because she was the one most benefited by the scheme. Could she have persuaded herself that Muriel would be equally benefited with herself she might have been braver. But not all the sophistry of her own could induce Miss Bradshaw to arrive at this conclusion. It would be pleasanter, less monotonous and dull; but the time then given by the conscientious gentlewoman to one would have to be shared by both. In lessons it was well enough, but in music Muriel might suffer, unless she made up for it by extra exertion on her own part.

Miss Bradshaw had reason to congratulate herself on the success of her mission. Mrs. Duerdon, contrary to all expectation, not only fell in with

the plan, but hailed it with delight. Why or wherefore it met with approbation it was impossible to say. Perhaps she rejoiced in being thus warmly petitioned, or perhaps she had some fears that if she did not accede Miss Bradshaw might throw up her post, and persist in going to the enemy. This would not have suited Mrs. Duerdon for the present. But whatever her motive was she hid it very skilfully.

Mrs. Duerdon made only one objection, and that was on account of Owen. His education would have to be given up. Not for one second did the mistress of Astley Park contemplate the possibility of Caroline's coming to the house; still less would she have sanctioned her son's going out all weathers. Muriel could walk to the Vicarage daily; it was no distance beyond the Park, and would train her better for earning her living in the future. As for Owen, it was just as well his tuition should be left alone for a time. He had been looking both fragile and delicate, and his mother professed anxiety on that score. Thus Miss Bradshaw won her cause, and Muriel's school-days were relieved of their dulness. Caroline and Muriel became better friends; the very incompatibility of their dispositions attracted them to each other. Muriel was so unworldly, so simple, that she did not easily read Caroline's want of sincerity. She was so clinging and trusting that she believed all that the more experienced girl

professed. She took everything to be real and true.

Caroline sometimes wondered at such extreme guilelessness, such marvellous faith and simplicity. In wonderment she would look into the other's eyes to read there if no mask was worn, no goodness assumed, but all that met her gaze was a look so clear and truthful, so earnest and deep, that it needed no words to confirm what she saw. This straightforward conscientiousness and unaffected modesty stirred Caroline as few other qualities could have done. If in the first she had been inclined only to laugh at and sneer at her companion, she soon learnt to respect a character so unique and original as Muriel's. Not unique and original only in principle, for that let us trust is often to be met with, but unique in the grand depths of her brave, undemonstrative nature, original and quaint in her way of showing these qualities. Mrs. Mervin was quite in her element in having young people around her again. She gave up one of her prettiest sitting-rooms. It faced on the sloping lawn, and was shaded by a large cedar tree, the pride and delight of the Vicarage gardens. Two long windows very close together were open all the long summer day, and let in the grateful breeze, which stirred the lace curtains gently about. And the delicious scent of mignonette was wafted in from the garden distinct from the perfume of other flowers.

Mrs. Mervin could not keep away from this

charmed spot, for charmed it had become to her in its brightness and cheerfulness. She loved life, did this contented, bustling little lady. Always merry and busy herself, she liked to gather human beings of all ages around her. Her own good man was so silent, so lost in his books and papers. Into this room flitted Mrs. Mervin continually, under some pretext or other; it seemed as if she could not keep away. Sometimes she brought a harmless piece of news, important and all absorbing to her; some one was born, or married, or buried. Often she took a glass of wine and a biscuit, a tumbler of milk and a little bread-and-butter. She was sure they needed these; Muriel looked pale or Caroline tired; Miss Bradshaw was overworked, and must be looked after. One or all these excuses were offered. And somehow the schoolroom party got to look out for these visits. A morning seemed long that passed without her bustling presence, and instead of finding lessons hindered, as she at first feared might be the case, Miss Bradshaw began to find them the greatest stimulants to industry.

"It used to be just like this in mamma's time," Caroline informed them one day. "I have often heard her say there never was any one like grandmamma. She could not bear one of her children to be in trouble."

Mrs. Mervin laughed, and a heightened colour rose to her cheeks.

"Of course I could not," assented she. "Your

grandpapa often said it would not do, that I was spoiling them, unfitting them for the world, but he never really interfered, and they are all gone from the parent nest—all except Ernest, the youngest—and doing good in their generation I trust. I cannot do much for you all now; I'm getting and old woman, and not so well able to look after your comforts. But I love having a schoolroom; it reminds me of the dear old time when my youngsters collected under my wing. There were six of them," she said, patting Muriel's hand caressingly, "six, and only one left."

"I remember them all, dear Mrs. Mervin," observed Miss Bradshaw soothingly. "The Vicarage pew used to be full in those days."

"Aye, that it did."

"Your three daughters all married young, and your eldest son went abroad as a missionary. Am I not right?"

"Perfectly so. Yes, they all married young," assented Mrs. Mervin, shaking her head sorrowfully. "They were happy, merry girls, and many suitors came for them. I wished much to keep one, I did not mind which, but it is hard to persuade young people."

Mrs. Mervin laughed, but it was not a laugh of mirth. The tone seemed full of a strange sadness.

"Where is Mr. Gerald?" inquired Miss Bradshaw. "I was away much of his time, and knew the least of him."

"Oh, Gerald is in Australia, and doing well. He is a grand man there. He went to college and studied for the ministry, but some friends of his were going to seek their fortunes, and nothing would satisfy him but he must join them. The spirit of unrest had entered his soul. Then, long after my nursery had been done away, Ernest came and comforted me. He is much younger than the others."

"I wish he was older," pouted Caroline. "It is so stupid having an uncle one's own age."

"Ah, Carrie," laughed her grandmamma, "your mortification must be swallowed up in my delight. You must try and not mind it, dear. He will soon be going to Cambridge, and I shall want to keep you altogether if your mamma can spare you."

"I do not know that she can," replied Caroline, rather ungratefully.

Muriel secretly hoped that Mrs. Danvers might be induced to grant permission. These days were very pleasant. She was growing nearly as bright as Norman, and he welcomed the change with her. Day by day he noticed the difference. All his prayer was that it might continue.

CHAPTER XVIII.

At the Christmas examination which took place at Jycliffe Grammar School Norman gained several prizes, and became head boy, or captain, much to his openly avowed gratification. He had now no cause to be anxious about winning the fifty pound exhibition. His doubts as to Alan Murray's superiority were set at rest; not one boy in the whole school gained anything like the number of marks he had done. There was no jealousy among his companions at his success. They were all delighted, for he was a deservedly universal favourite, and none were louder or more sincere in their congratulations than Alan Murray.

"I knew, Vivian, I could not hold a candle to you," he remarked in his pleasant way, and with a peculiar toss of the head singularly significant. "I am heartily glad it is so; you deserve success."

And the proud patrician boy shook Norman's hand warmly.

Mr. Duerdon was also much pleased. The proof of so much industry and ability gave him great gratification. He had never distinguished himself at school; his talents were not of a bril-

liant order, but it pleased him that Millicent's son should excel.

Mrs. Duerdon expressed neither pleasure nor displeasure; it was immaterial to her. She might have said more had Muriel been the fortunate scholar, but Miss Bradshaw gave no prize. She scarcely deemed it wise where there was so little competition. It might have created a spirit of envy between the two girls. Not that Miss Bradshaw thought Muriel could ever be envious, but then she would have no reason, for she would be the fortunate pupil. Muriel, though less showy than Caroline, was much better grounded, so that perhaps the emulation would not have been altogether fair.

Christmas was coming, and Dr. Green had arranged that the Vivians should spend it with him. He had gained Mrs. Duerdon's full concurrence and sanction. Boldly and fearlessly had he gone to her and claimed consent. She had indifferently declared that their going or staying was of no moment to her, that she did not mind whether they were in the house or away. She could not have been more utterly indifferent had they been strangers whom she had never seen. But little cared Dr. Green for this. His bonny bairns were coming, and he would make up to them for all lost love and kindness. His heart was large enough to entertain a whole colony of children. His grand, rugged nature was at rest.

Cherry Cottage was in a grand state of preparation. But 'l'homme propose mais Dieu dispose' was very apparent now. The very day before they were to go, and the Vivians' things lay ready packed in keen anticipation of their coming treat, Martha was taken ill. It was a sudden attack, and was soon over, but the doctor feared infection, and the long-talked-of visit had to be indefinitely postponed. Then Sarah's mother died, and the girl was sent for home, and before she returned the holidays were over. The Duerdons had spent a festive Christmas both at home and abroad, but beyond *the* day itself the season made no difference to the Vivians. True, they in connection with Owen, were summoned to the drawing-room on party nights, but this rather than a pleasure was a pain to them. The principal part of their holidays was spent in the house. The weather day after day turned out wet, and there were no walks to be got. Norman visited Sultan daily; nothing prevented that. The beautiful creature neighed directly his youthful master appeared. His proud head went down, waiting patiently to be stroked and spoken to. Muriel tried to coax him to greet her in the same way, but it was useless; he kept all welcomes for his master. Winter lasted a long time; the rain continued, and it was not until the double birthdays were over that the weather "took up," and was fine. Sultan became more and more of a treasure. He went so swiftly

that Norman did not need to start so early. The boy often wondered what he should have done without the doctor's beautiful present; what his life would have been if he had had to tramp, tramp daily to school, no matter how cold or wet the weather. He was truly thankful that he was not tried.

Norman was now sixteen, and Muriel one year younger. The difference in their height was striking. Norman was a tall, slim stripling. His sister was short, with tiny hands and feet. Mr. Duerdon was distressed at the boy's rapid growth. He often declared he would have weights put on his shoulders and keep him down. But Norman laughingly protested against such a proceeding; he wished to be tall.

One day in early June, after a long walk, Muriel astonished herself and every one else by fainting. Quietly undemonstrative in that as in all she did, it passed off without much fuss. Mrs. Duerdon was heard to say she believed the girl had done it on purpose, but no one paid any attention to the remark. But when, a few weeks after, Norman did the same thing, and was a long time in coming round, Mr. Duerdon got alarmed, and said there must be something wrong with the children; perhaps they were studying too hard. He sent straight off for Dr. Green; that good man looked grave.

"Just what I have been dreading," he declared

slowly. "Too much work—brain work. It would not hurt a dull boy, but this is a susceptible subject, a sensitive lad with no muscular development to fall back upon. The system suffers. The way in which Norman is growing, besides, is sufficient in itself alone to prostrate a delicate constitution. He must have rest, entire rest for a month or two; no books or studies to worry or amuse him, but a complete change. Sea air would do much to restore him; let them both go to Saltby."

"By all means," assented Mr. Duerdon willingly.

"Let him have the best of nourishment, too; meat with the gravy in, milk, and even cream. Some people do not believe in the power of cream, but I do."

"Wine and porter, I suppose you recommend as well?" inquired Mr. Duerdon in a slightly huffed tone.

He felt hurt that Dr. Green should mention such a subject as nourishment. Did not the boy live on the fat of the land?

"Most de-ci-ded-ly not. Duerdon, you are annoyed with me for speaking out so plainly."

"Well! I confess to feeling slightly piqued," owned Mr. Duerdon freely; "it seems as if you think I grudge the boy anything. We keep a good table, and he has whatever he likes."

"Pooh-pooh," responded the doctor; "you are talking now without your book, that is, you know

nothing of what you are asserting. Keep a good table, of course you do, who doubts it, with your rich soups and made dishes, your highly seasoned things, and French, nobody knows what, things bad enough for you, but poison to a young person. But Norman gets none of these things luckily. All he wants is good plain joints, oatmeal, and milk. Now, Duerdon, can you assure me he has these? How many meals in the week does he take with you? Can you tell me if his appetite is good? Do you observe what he eats?"

Mr. Duerdon was quite startled. Dr. Green had stated an uncontrovertible fact.

"Well, really, Green," he said, "you have opened my eyes; I know next to nothing on these points. Breakfast he has before I am up; dinner he takes at school; tea in the nursery, and supper, if he has any, I suppose, will be in the schoolroom. On Saturday and Sunday I see a little more of him; but, do you know, whether he eats much or little has escaped my observation. I will attend more to these things in the future. I should be glad if you will speak to him—impress on him the necessity for taking plenty. One word from you may work wonders. And all I can say is that he is welcome to everything I have. There is nothing that money can do that shall be denied him. He is in every way as one of my own."

"I am sure of it," returned the doctor heartily.

"You are one man in a thousand. Had I doubted it, do you think I would have spoken as I did?"

And Dr. Green grasped the other's hand warmly, and shook it over and over again.

Norman was not present at this interview. Dr. Green had left him, and joined Mr. Duerdon, but he soon heard of it. The prospect of a sojourn at the sea delighted him; he was overjoyed.

"It will be the most glorious thing, Murry, the greatest treat of our lives," he observed, with a joyous outburst. "Just think of it, Sis, a month, a whole month, by the grand ocean, the roaring, angry sea, watching its tide ebb and flow, ripple and foam incessantly, or seeing its little waves come tumbling in one after another in childish play as if they never could rise and rage furiously."

"It will be truly glorious," echoed Muriel. "I hope there will be a storm, Norman, a real downright storm. I can imagine how the wind would whistle and shriek through the angry billows, puff them up, and throw them down until at last they got quite worn out like an angry child."

"Why, Muriel, anyone would think you had been to the sea," remarked Norman in surprise, "you speak of it so well."

"Just as you do, my brother; both our information is gained from the same source—books and our own vivid imaginations."

"Then, Muriel," continued Norman, "can you not fancy when the waves are uplifted and the wind shrieks its loudest through them, how it will remind us of the spirit of the many dead bodies who have been sucked in under the cruel waters, crying out aloud."

"Oh, Norman, that is dreadful!" was the answer; "you would make out that the sea commits murder."

"So it does, sweet sister. At the last dread day when the dead have to be given up from everywhere, the sea will be perfectly sick with the countless multitude she casts back, all of whom she has betrayed to their earthly end. Some in smiling treachery, others in angry tumult, but all unwillingly. Dear Muriel, I always look upon the sea as deceitful. Look how she smiles and shines. It is all very well to dwell by her shores for a few weeks, but nothing would induce me to always live there."

"You make me feel melancholy, Nor," said Muriel, laying her hand affectionately on her brother's shoulder.

"I do not wish to do that," replied Norman, kindly. "We will turn from the sea, and glance at the mighty cliffs standing erect and grim; watching the wide boundless ocean, and unamazed at the surrounding grandeur. Can you not fancy how grand they must be when they stand unmoved at all the angry storms, the wild dashing of

the water rising, rising higher and higher in its fury; listening to the solemn booming going on around, yet never paying any heed to its violence? How splendid they must be"—

"They must, dear Nor."

"Then think, dear Muriel love, of the shells, the delicate pink little shell so beautifully formed, and the lovely seaweed; I will gather such lots for you whilst you sit and watch. The anemones too. Oh, what a treat it will all be! I feel as if it were too good to be true."

And Norman was correct in his feelings. It was too good to be true.

Mrs. Duerdon was highly indignant at the proposition.

"What would the Vivians want next?" she demanded in her anger. "It was utterly preposterous spending so much on them. For her part she would not give way to such nonsense."

Very gently, very patiently, Mr. Duerdon argued the point with her, until he found that the lady was getting her way; then, with slight irritation, he said Dr. Green had insisted on such a course being pursued.

"Take Norman," she conceded; "Muriel surely is robust enough."

And sooner than have a commotion, sooner than run decidedly counter to his wife's wishes, Mr. Duerdon gave way. He was willing to take Muriel, you understand, but meeting with opposition he gave up the point.

So thus poor Muriel and Norman were to be parted. The greatest treat in their lives was to be crushed and put away merely to please the freak or whim of an angry, jealous woman. Jealous, you will repeat; yes, it seems absurd, but she was jealous of two orphaned children who were so much at her mercy.

Dear reader, whoever you may be, never let jealousy enter into your hearts. Tear it out, trample on it. Crush it to death, but never let it grow in you. Smother it at the first faint suspicion. Anything rather than permit such a vice to take root.

CHAPTER XIX.

The knowledge that she was not going to be taken to the seaside came as a heavy blow to Muriel. It was so sudden and unexpected. She had entered with such bright anticipations of pleasure into all Norman's bright dreams of future joy that the fall was a fearful one. From happiness to sorrow is a short distance, barely a second being sometimes requisite for the transit; yet it is a rough road to traverse—a horrible transition. Poor Muriel was overwhelmed with grief, and it was not the least part of that grief that Norman would feel it as much as she did. Major was the one who enlightened her, and then not in the kindliest way.

Muriel was coming from the schoolroom when they met. Norman and she had been expatiating at great lengths on the glories of the coming visit to the seaside. Their imaginations had run riot, and the young girl for once was in the exuberance of joy. She gave way to it, as was rarely her wont, by dancing round and round. It was a manifestation of joy in one so young, yet it was not natural in Muriel. Her high spirits and merry ways had been too early checked.

Major resented the girl's happiness; Muriel was

no favourite of hers. Moreover, Major owed her a grudge for the day that they had had their combat on the stairs, and Mr. Duerdon had sternly reproved her—her, and not the despised orphan child.

"Whatever are you dancing round for like that?" asked the maid crossly, "for ever like a doll at a marionette show."

Muriel in her ecstasy seized hold of one of Major's hands.

"Oh, Major, I am so pleased. Norman and I are going to the sea for a whole month or more, and we have been arranging what fun we will have. We have never been, you know, and it will be such a treat. Is is not a grand"—

Major pulled her hand away.

"Have done, Miss Muriel. Going to the sea-side, are you? Come, come, I know different. Ah, ah! Mrs. Duerdon says she is not going to be bothered with you there. She was none so willing to take Master Norman, but Mr. Duerdon wished it, so as he was ill she gave way."

"What do you mean? Oh, it's surely not true," broke from Muriel in fright and bewilderment, "you never mean to say that—that—Mrs. Duerdon—is going—going to—separate us—Norman and me. Oh, Major, say you are only teasing"—

"I am not teasing anyway this time—I'm speaking the blessed truth. Master Norman is to

be taken away, and you are to be left behind. Nobody wants you, you see; you make yourself so stuck up and disagreeable."

"And I am to be left at home," moaned Muriel in despair. "Oh, I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it," and the young girl threw herself on the ground in utter abandonment.

"Don't give way like that," said Major, dismayed at the effect of her words.

She had meant to punish the young girl whom she had almost been taught to dislike, but she had not calculated on such grief as this from the quiet Muriel.

"Don't go on like that, I beg of you. It's only for a few weeks after all. Get up, Miss Muriel."

Major laid her hands on the other's shoulders as if to help her, but Muriel shook her off.

"Leave me," she begged piteously. "Please go away. I would bear my trouble alone."

"Well, you'll be having Master Norman coming and catching you, and you'd not like to grieve him I know. He'd never go to the seaside if he caught sight of you now."

She had used the only argument that could have roused the sorrowful girl.

Muriel dragged herself up, and away to her own room.

And Norman had to be told. How could she tell him? Yet how was it possible to hear him talking and arranging plans for the visit. No, he must be told.

So the next day when he asked her if her packing was begun, she burst into tears.

"I was only teasing you a little bit, sister mine," said Norman playfully. "You know last Christmas when we thought we were going to the doctor's, your things were ready for days before hand."

"They won't be this time," sobbed Muriel.

"Muriel," exclaimed Norman, jumping up in haste, "you are not surely crying. What is the matter, darling? Do you not care to go? Do not cry, dear, it is so unusual to you. You shall not go if you would rather not."

And the young boy put his arm affectionately round his sister.

"It's not that, Norman," answered Muriel, trying to recover herself, "it's not that, I should be happy with you anywhere—Astley, the antipodes, the bottom of the sea—anywhere. But don't you see, dear Nor, there is no allusion to my going. The fact is I am not to go; Major told me so yesterday."

"That's an evil that can soon be remedied," said Norman proudly. "They shall not separate us, Muriel. Our father and mother are dead, and we are all in all to each other. Never fear, dear, I will not go and leave you behind."

For one moment Muriel felt comforted, but reflection showed her this course of action would not do. Norman was delicate and needed change. She was strong and could do without it.

"Oh, Nor dear, that would never do," she said lovingly. "I want you to go, darling. I am not so selfish as all that comes to. I should never have broken down, but you have painted things so temptingly, such beautiful bright pictures, and it is so far from the dull reality, that I could not bear it."

"There is no reason to bear it," answered Norman firmly. "When I drew such glorious visions it was for us both. We both stay here, or we both go together. There is no need to say more. It is not a question of money, or I might have hesitated, but such intolerable injustice shall not be allowed. We are singularly placed here, are we not, love, but we must never desert each other."

And the refined, sensitive face of the boy shone with its stedfastness of purpose.

"How good you are! how unselfish," exclaimed Muriel in admiration. "Oh, Nor, darling, how I love you! But do you know, dear, that I want you to go—that it would only increase my pain and sorrow tenfold to keep you here. I want you to get well and strong, and—and I shall manage without you. Promise me, Nor, you will go."

Muriel spoke with great earnestness, yet through it all she tried to put on a spirit of playfulness. But it did not deceive Norman. There was no answering smile on his face. It was perfectly changed, the bright, happy look was gone; the clear, beautiful eyes looked dim and troubled.

"Muny, darling," he said sadly, "I cannot see what is best. I always wish to do right, but it is all dark, dark, pet. How hard and dreary the road is getting. And they want to part us. I cannot understand it. It is not as if expense were any object. No it's not that; what can it be?"

Norman bowed his head on his hands, and was silent.

This was more than Muriel could bear. It was hard to be in trouble herself; it was a thousand times harder to see Norman in trouble. So she went and lifted his head, and kissed his forehead gently. The action was expressive of love.

"You must not grieve, Nor," she pleaded, "whatever happens, that is worse than all, and if we come to think of it, what a mountain we are making out of a molehill. It is nothing to be parted for one month, when the rest of our life is to be spent together. Just think, Nor, it is just what we really wanted."

"How is that, Murry?" he asked, with a ghost of a smile. "Me to have all the good things and you to have none."

"It's of no consequence for a few weeks," replied Muriel, hopefully. "I can look after Sultan, Nor. How lonely he would have been without both of us. It is all for the best, and you will never think about not going again."

"I would infinitely rather stay with you, Muriel."

"I know it, dear; but you must not give way

to the thought. It is imperatively necessary that you should go. Therefore go you must. Think what loving letters we can send. My writing desk will indeed be useful. Why, Norman, I wish you were gone, so that I might look out for the post."

"You are a brave unselfish little woman," declared Norman, proudly. "No boy ever had such a precious sister as you."

Muriel turned on him one of her most winning smiles.

"I mean all that I say, Norman. I am truly glad you are going to the sea."

"Pooh! what good's the sea," said Norman, disdainfully, "without you there?"

It must be owned that Muriel behaved herself well on this occasion. For a short time she and Norman had changed characters. She became the comforter—he the comforted. It would have been well if she had observed the same demeanour when talking to Mrs. Duerdon. But she had a purpose in keeping up bravely before Norman. She feared greatly that if she made a trouble of his going, he would positively refuse to leave her. When away from him she had no such motive. In the middle of the night lying wakeful on her bed and thinking of the impending separation, it suddenly occurred to Muriel, amongst other thoughts, that perhaps she could prevail on Mrs. Duerdon to change her mind. She had not much hope about it, but there was a chance; how delighted Norman

would be if she succeeded. Expense was nothing to Mr. Duerdon, but it was a great deal to his wife, and this Muriel knew. She determined to count up her money, and see if she had enough, and offer it all to that lady. Early the next morning, Muriel was up. She had more than three pounds, perhaps it would do. If not she could borrow from Norman. But she would not ask him beforehand, as he might want to pay all. Muriel was outwardly calm when she preferred her petition, though her heart beat with suspense, and her voice slightly trembled. But all she said was in vain. Entreaties, persuasions, prayers alike useless. Mrs. Duerdon listened to her with calm indifference.

"You are wasting words on the desert air, Muriel Vivian," she said, yawning. "An imploring manner, theatrical antics are lost on me. You have to stay at home, in spite of your large offering of three pounds, which would about pay your journey there."

"I could give more," added Muriel, eagerly.

"You are not going with us," responded Mrs. Duerdon. "Who do you suppose wants you?"

"Norman does," was the low reply.

"Ah, yes, Norman, a fine pair of you. He is tolerable, but you—why child your society is so unpleasant—that—well, the less we say about it the better. You plain disagreeable girl, your presence is an infliction!"

Muriel drew a deep breath. It was hard to bear this, doubly hard to one of her temperament, but it was no more than she was prepared for. If she had been pleading for herself alone, she would have endured no more, she would have gone away and borne her trouble alone as she best might. But there was Norman. Bright handsome Norman.

"If you will let me go," she implored, "I will keep out of your way, you shall never see me. It is so hard for Norman and me to be parted. I know I am plain, but you shall not be annoyed by my want of beauty. Please let me join you," she stammered, in all humility.

There was a pause, and Muriel's heart bounded with hope, but only to sink deeper than ever at the next words.

"No; it is not to be thought of, there would be the expense of another bedroom. If you had been an interesting child, amiable and obliging, Major might have taken pity on you, and let you share her room."

"Major indeed!" retorted Muriel, hotly, "do you think I would be indebted to her?"

"Beggars cannot be choosers."

"That remark is not applicable to me," rejoined Muriel, "I am not a beggar, besides in this case I could make a choice. I should simply refuse to share any apartment with Major, you have allowed her to treat me far too rudely."

Mrs. Duerdon laughed scornfully.

"That is rich," she asserted, "allowed her. I have nothing to do with your quarrels. My time would be fully occupied in settling your disputes if I once began."

"Major has no right to be rude to me," replied Muriel, firmly. "It is not a question of quarrelling, a servant ought to be respectful to a clergyman's daughter."

"Ah, yes, a clergyman's daughter!" repeated Mrs. Duerdon, "so you are. I am glad you reminded me of the fact, I was in danger of forgetting. Your *gauche-gawky* manners, awkward in the extreme, do not proclaim gentle birth. How would a phylactery answer with your parentage inscribed on it. Surely a deficiency would thus be remedied."

To have looked at Muriel's face one would never have thought she was generally pale. She was red enough now from forehead to throat. Yet she gazed steadily at her tormentor with eyes that never wavered.

"It might be a help to you," she replied, clearly. "Your memory is not always treacherous."

"Don't glare at me in that way, Muriel Vivian, you look now as I should imagine that wonderful mother of yours used to look," pursued Mrs. Duerdon.

"Dear mamma!" said Muriel, softened by the mention of her mother. "I can never hope to

look as she did. It is my incessant prayer that I may grow something like her."

This angered Mrs. Duerdon, but she would not show it.

"You can go now, Muriel," she observed. "Your presence is not desirable. Send Spence to me. Stay"—as Muriel was going out, "not one word of this affair to her."

"Which affair?" questioned Muriel, puzzled, her head being full of her mother.

"The subject you have been petitioning so humbly upon—our visit to the seaside."

"Certainly not, if you do not wish it," replied Muriel at once. "Ah, Spence is going, I should not have minded sharing a room with her."

"I daresay not, you know where you are well off. My child"—and she laid great stress on the words, "is there. Do you suppose I should allow you to disturb him. No, Muriel, out of this house you do not go, so make your mind easy. For the present Astley Park is your home. Norman goes with us. I have not been pleased with your manner lately—just now for instance it was very rude. I am glad to separate you, glad to have some punishment. Here are you both totally dependent on my husband's bounty—charity I might say, for it is so—fatherless, motherless, penniless, indebted to us for each crumb of bread you eat, destitute of the faintest spark of gratitude, needing our"—

"It is false!" interrupted Muriel, beside herself with fury, "quite false. We are not destitute, and you know we are not, neither are we ungrateful. Every kind act thrown at us grudgingly. Every atom of clothing and every small treat we grasp with avidity and thankfulness. We are unboundedly grateful far more than the case demands. You would not have us at all if you could help it, you simply tolerate us because Mr. Duerdon will not turn us away. Your indifference is galling, you trample on us, you torture us in every possible way, you deny us the simplest treats, me at least; and you make me feel the weight of the heavy chain of debt and obligation that drags me down, and I cannot breathe as I ought. My manner you complain is awkward and gawky, would it not be a wonder if it were otherwise, after the restraint of your presence. If I were alone do you suppose I would stand it for one hour, no not for a second. I would wander off somewhere free and unfettered. I would starve sooner than submit to such thraldom, such hateful bondage!"

She paused for breath, she was nearly spent. She had quite forgotten herself, to whom she was speaking, and where she was. For a few moments she had lost her own identity.

"As for punishment," she proceeded, "I am glad I know the ground on which I stand. Your pun—ish—ment," and she pronounced the word slowly in syllables, "will be of no avail now you

have told me why you will not let me go. If I had had any discernment I should not have needed telling. I would not go if you went down on your knees and begged me. You could not drag me. Nothing could force me to go."

"Oh, indeed, would not you?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, doubtfully. "Any way you will not be tried."

There was a strange light in her eyes. She had listened to Muriel's tirade in amazement, but it had not roused her. She was amused rather than indignant at the girl's outburst. But still it must be corrected, she must not forget what was due to her benefactress.

"Go to your room, Muriel Vivian," she said, in a sort of shrill shriek, "go to your room and stay there. Leave my presence, your very breath contaminates the air. Your attempt at rudeness is overpowering. You require crushing. I will take care that it is done. Your meals shall be served in your bedroom until further notice. Go at once and stay there."

Now it will scarcely be credited, but Muriel scarcely caught one word addressed to her. Her heart was surging and swelling with the depth of her sorrow. In the language that she had used to Mrs. Duerdon she had given utterance to the reality of her sentiments. For once she had thrown off the burden that oppressed her. But in throwing it off she felt no relief, rather did it seem

as if the chain pressed yet more heavily on her. She had been rude, and no one can do wrong and not suffer. She must confess her fault, no matter what was the consequence. Yet how weary, how spent she felt. Passing her hand slowly across her forehead, she began—

"I hope you will forget what I said just now, I cannot think what made me talk as I did," she said, with difficulty, for it was hard work for her to ask forgiveness from Mrs. Duerdon. "Please pardon me, and I will try not to offend again."

"So so," exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon, complacently, "a little punishment is bringing you to your senses is it. You can beg for pity and pardon when you think."

"Oh, you have quite misunderstood me," replied Muriel, hastily, all her good intention and feelings gone. "I care not in the least for what punishment you condemn me. What is it to be?"

"Go to your room and stay there until my further pleasure. Go at once or I may box your ears, and that would be tiring."

"Should I ring for Major, she"—

"How dare you speak to me like that, you bad girl," raved Mrs. Duerdon in exasperation. "If you rang for Major, she should beat you until her arm ached."

"Scarcely," responded Muried, "I was going to ask should I ring for Major to take your message to Spence. You want her and I shall not be

able to go to the nursery now." Muriel spoke wearily, yet there was a dignity in her manner that the elder lady lacked. It was the dignity of sorrow. "So I am to spend my time for nobody knows how long in my own room," she murmured to herself. "Perhaps it is as well. Nobody in the whole world cares for me but Norman, and I am so naughty. I say such dreadful things, perhaps I shall harm him. Oh, Norman! Norman!" she said, throwing herself on her own little bed, "I have made matters ten times worse by my temper. Why did I not let her say what she liked and never answer her. Oh, I am bad, bad and she tries to make me worse. She irritates me so, and then before I think—I am in disgrace. I know I should be better, but I cannot. Oh mamma, darling, why did you go and leave your two children to the frowns of a cold world? it was very very cruel of you, oh mamma, mamma, how could you? You would have taught us how to do right, and there is no one to show us here. No encouragement—no sympathy, no forbearance, it is always one thing—wrong—wrong—wrong!"

And thus Muriel went on in her distress, distress caused less by her punishment it must be confessed than grief for the error of her doings. She was far sorrier to be banished to her bedroom for wilful misbehaviour than she was even to be kept back from going to the seaside with her brother, heavy as that trouble had been. She had then the comfort of a clear conscience, now all was dark.

CHAPTER XX.

"NORMAN," said Mr. Duerdon, at lunch, that same day, "you eat nothing; we must take you off to the seaside and try and coax back your appetite. You look pale and tired."

Mr. Duerdon's tones were kind, and the tears rushed to the boy's eyes.

"Thank you, Uncle Fred, I fear that will hardly restore me."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Duerdon, in surprise, lifting up a puzzled face.

"I do not think I shall gain any benefit away from Muriel," he replied fearlessly. "We have never been parted, and it is a great trouble to us both."

"Oh, we are going to have a row from the other side of the house now, are we?" questioned Mrs. Duerdon.

Norman took no notice of this speech. "You must not misunderstand me, Uncle Fred," pursued the boy, earnestly. "I am very grateful to you for taking me, and being so good to me, but I shall never be happy whilst I leave Muriel in sorrow."

Mr. Duerdon glanced at his wife to see in what way she took this sentence. But she was not affected by it in the manner he had expected.

"You are two of the greatest hypocrites I ever

came across," she declared, angrily, "pretending to be grateful when you do not understand the meaning of the word."

"You must misunderstand us," was Norman's quiet reply. "We are always grateful to Mr. Duerdon. He is always good to us. I do not know how any one could be otherwise than deeply grateful to him."

"By which you mean to imply that you have nothing to be thankful to me for," shrieked Mrs. Duerdon, in high dudgeon. "After the way in which I have toiled for you both."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Duerdon, I meant to make no such implication," returned Norman, with a smile on his refined countenance. "But as you have mentioned such a notion I will not altogether deny it. I will leave myself out of the question, but my sister has nothing to be grateful to you for. You render her life miserable."

"She deserves it," answered Mrs. Duerdon. "She gives nothing but trouble."

"She does not deserve it," dissented Norman, "you do not show her kindness in the least thing —you barely show her justice." Norman crumbled his bread into crumbs as he spoke, and there was a troubled look in his truthful eye.

"You make a strong assertion, my boy," spoke up Mr. Duerdon, rather sternly. "I can only excuse you on account of your health."

"But it is a true assertion nevertheless," declared Norman, firmly. "My sister is very badly

treated, and my heart aches for her. If I were a man I would take her away and work for her until I dropped—but I am helpless. Look at her, poor girl, going in the innocence of her heart to Mrs. Duerdon, and offering her savings of several months so that she might go to the seaside, only to be repulsed with scorn. She begged, implored, entreated, but only with similar success."

"Is this true?" questioned Mr. Duerdon, incredulously, of his wife. "Does Muriel really want to go so much? If so why not take her?"

"She shall not go. I do not want her," answered Mrs. Duerdon, in a shrill tone. "The girl has been most abominably rude--she shall suffer for it."

"She was not rude until long after that was settled," persisted Norman, "and then it was under great provocation. You delight to call us paupers or names with the same meaning, and Muriel, who has a proud spirit, and thinks it casts a slur on our parents, resents it, and directly she speaks out you show your forbearance and kindness by sending her to Coventry."

"Fred, will you suffer me to be spoken to like this?" demanded Mrs. Duerdon. "Will you not send Norman from the table?"

"Let me spare you all annoyance by going," said the boy, readily. "I feel stifled already when I think about Muriel. Mr. Duerdon, may I retire?"

"Don't go, Norman," cried Owen.

But Norman just stooped and kissed the little fellow and left the room.

"What do you think of that behaviour?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, triumphantly. "What are you going to make of these Vivians that you have boasted about so long?"

"I do not know what to make of anybody," was the weary reply. "Things seem to be at sixes and sevens. Owen, do give over crying. There is great mismanagement somewhere. I cannot make it out. Everyone but us thinks they are such splendid characters."

"They want crushing, they have both too much spirit for their position."

Mr. Duerdon's face fell. "Yet the head master at Jycliffe assured me that Norman was the noblest, yet at the same time the meekest character he ever knew."

"Those kind of masters are easily gulled," declared Mrs. Duerdon. "They only see the pupils during school hours whilst lessons are going on. They have but few opportunities of judging. They study books better than boys."

Norman joined Muriel. She had had her dinner. The tray was on her dressing table.

"Have you had a good dinner, Murry?"

"Splendid, Nor," and the girl's face lighted up rapturously at sight of her brother. "You have brought 'Queechy,' too, it will amuse me many hours."

"We will read together, Sis, and talk over poor little Fleda's difficulties, it will while away the time."

"But you must not stay cooped up here," answered Muriel, decisively, "it would never do. Besides, you will offend Mrs. Duerdon."

"Well, even at the risk of that dire calamity," said Norman, "I mean to stay. If we have to be parted soon we shall not be separated now, not even for twenty Mrs. Duerdon's."

"Oh, Nor," said Muriel, twining her arms fondly round her brother's neck, "I am afraid we are not as good as we ought to be. We ought to bear all that is laid upon us patiently."

"So you do, Muriel. I often wonder at your patience and endurance."

"You wonder at me?" echoed Muriel. "Why, Norman, I verily believe I am the worst girl in the world. I am always doing wrong. I try to be good, but I cannot. Just look how rude I was this morning."

"Oh, it was not your fault, darling. It was Mrs. Duerdon; she is too bad for anything; don't let us think of her, let's read away and forget her."

A cloud passed over Norman's bright face as he spoke, but it quickly dispelled as they perused Elizabeth Wetherell's well-known book. Mr. Duerdon came to see the prisoner. He found the brother and sister together, but they were not

reading then. Norman was sitting at Muriel's feet, his head in her lap fast asleep.

"He has been asleep some time," she whispered. "I was reading aloud and he fell off. I have not moved since for fear of waking him. He looked so tired, poor boy."

"He will get cold, I fear," remarked Mr. Duerdon thoughtfully, in a low tone. He cast his eye around. A large eider-down quilt covered Muriel's bed. This he fetched and laid gently over the sleeping boy.

"Thank you very much," said Muriel, gratefully. "I do not, however, think he would have taken cold, it is close and hot everywhere."

"Mrs. Duerdon has desired me to say that you are at liberty to go into the schoolroom, but that for the present you must not come downstairs."

"Thank you very much," responded Muriel again, "it is an extension of freedom I did not expect."

"You still feel that your punishment is just?" asked Mr. Duerdon, with diffidence. He wished to know whether Muriel considered Mrs. Duerdon was treating her harshly.

Muriel hesitated. "I was very rude," she answered, simply.

"Then you think you deserve punishment, do you?"

"Most certainly," she replied. "No one ought to speak as I did."

Mr. Duerdon's face cleared. He felt relieved. After what Norman had said at dinner he had had his doubts as to the justice of Mrs. Duerdon's behaviour. But now he had Muriel's own word for it surely he might be satisfied. It had been his intervention that had brought about a mitigation of the sentence.

"Do not let Norman sleep much longer," whispered Mr. Duerdon on leaving the room. "I had much to say to you, but it must be postponed until a more convenient time."

A conversation that has to be kept up in whispers, unless between two perfectly in accord with one another, is a difficult business, and so Mr. Duerdon found it.

Dr. Green often called to see Norman; in fact, daily. He inquired for Muriel several times. The same answer was always given—she was upstairs.

"Bless my life," retorted the doctor, not well pleased, "what does she keep upstairs for? Why does she not come to see her old friend? Is she looking forward to going to the sea? Bless her! she's packing I guess."

"No," replied Norman, trying to look unmoved. "Muriel is not going to the seaside. She is to be left behind."

"Yes, doctor," said Mrs. Duerdon, in her most amiable style, "we have decided not to take her, our party is sufficiently large."

"Therefore one would make little difference.

Bless me, take her, and put a shake-down in one of the rooms. I'd find room for her if I were you; may I speak to her?"

"Certainly. Norman, go and tell her Dr. Green wishes to speak to her."

Muriel looked very shy when she entered the dining-room. She bowed to Mrs. Duerdon, but that lady looked away and would not notice her. Dr. Green drew the trembling figure to him.

"What is coming to you, you little waif?" he asked kindly. "Are you learning to avoid all your friends. There is no getting to see you lately. Where do you hide yourself?"

Muriel hung her head. She would have liked to have told all her trouble to the doctor. Oh, if she only might; but there was that silent lady sitting so near; not looking at her, certainly, but listening to her. If she had not been there Muriel would not have opened her lips on the subject, thinking it was a betrayal of trust, but she scarcely recognized this now in fear of that quiet presence.

"You look nearly as pale and thin as your brother. In fact you look paler," declared Dr. Green, "for he never loses colour. Do you mean to trust to the sea breezes to restore your roses?"

Norman looked at the doctor puzzled. Had he forgotten that his sister was not to be of the party.

Muriel only answered quietly—"I never do have

any roses, Dr. Green; you must be thinking of some one else."

"Is your packing done yet?" pursued the medical man. "How many boxes are you taking?"

A slight trembling of the lip, almost imperceptible. "I am not taking any. I have no need, for I stay behind."

"From choice?"

A moment's pause. "No, not exactly from choice."

"Are you glad for Norman to go and leave you behind?"

"Oh, doctor, I am very thankful for Norman to go. He is so delicate and overworked that I am overjoyed to think he should have the change."

"Well, you have answered half my question, now for the other half. Are you glad to be left?"

A short catching of the breath, slightly suspicious, a timid look at Mrs. Duerdon's back in the distance, and a steadfast glance into Norman's face, then the answer was proudly given—

"I am glad to stay behind," she said, bravely; "glad for many reasons, that is. Of course I shall miss Norman, but I have Sultan to see after, and the flowers, and—and—oh, lots of things. Yes, I would rather not go now."

Mrs. Duerdon turned round sharply, an angry look on her face, words struggling to be spoken, but she arrested them wisely. It would scarcely be well to utter them before the staunch-hearted

doctor. Norman gazed at his sister in admiration. He took her hand. "Yes, doctor," he said, "Muriel is right, all is for the best, we both think so."

"You, at any rate, have the best of it," reproved the bluff, honest man. "You go to the seaside whilst Muriel is left behind."

Norman's eyes filled sensitively, he had not needed the rebuke.

"Yet Norman's will be the hardest task," replied Muriel, "it will be far easier for me to stay behind. You must not make it more difficult for him. He is very good to go and leave me. I cannot tell you how nobly he has behaved," and Muriel squeezed her brother's hand.

"I would ye were both mine, my bairns," said Dr. Green, fearlessly, "Ye should neither of ye be parted. But the Lord knows what is best."

"You can leave us now, Muriel," put in Mrs. Duerdon, sharply. "You are no longer wanted."

Muriel looked friendly at Dr. Green, and murmured a low "good-morning." She turned to leave the room, Norman hurried to open the door for her, not the least civility and attention would he omit paying. She was far above the highest lady in the land to him.

"Come back, come back," called out the doctor, "is that the way you leave me, my little woman? Have you no shake of the hand, no kindly kiss for the old man who would that he was your own

grandfather. Kiss me, I say, let that sweet little face of yours, so pure and simple-hearted, greet my stern, rugged countenance. There—and you too, Norman lad, God bless you both. Take her away, my boy, I'm upset; go at once, both of you."

"You seem to like the Vivians," remarked Mrs. Duerdon, in her coldest tones.

It roused the other's ire. "Like them," he answered, in his bluntest way, "Like is no word to express my feelings for those two noble children. I honour, I respect them. I wonder at their true nobility of character. I love them beyond my own comprehension. Their mother's spirit rests on them both."

"Ah, doctor, it's well you do not see the other side of their character," simpered the lady. "They are so deep they take you in. You would soon ruin them."

"Not with unkindness at any rate. Spoil them! Bless your life, madam, they cannot be spoilt. They are refined gold. But I must be off—madam I beg to wish you a good morning."

And the doctor, thoroughly upset, took his departure without shaking hands with the lady of Astley Park. It was an honour he could dispense with in his present mood. Mrs. Duerdon was left to chew the bitter cud of reflection, doubly bitter just then. Every one seemed against her in her opinion of the Vivians; her own husband even doubted her. Why was it all liked them? True

Dr. Green had not opposed her decision in taking Norman away from his sister. No, simply because he found the Vivians could both bear the burden laid on them. But he had shown her openly what he thought of her behaviour—he had told her what he would have done; and somehow Mrs. Duerdon felt more thwarted, more uncomfortable at this manner of treatment from one so worthy of respect as Dr. Green, than if he had condescended to argue the affair. She would almost rather he had obliged her to give in than that he had gone away in the manner he had done. He was a man of authority, and she dared not quarrel with him so low was her *prestige* in the neighbourhood already. And Dr. Green was bouncing home in high dudgeon. "To think they should be parted for nothing but to please her ladyship's whim," he muttered. "In their holidays too. It's a shame. I was nearly obliged to speak out. I am glad I did not. I will help to strengthen their characters. Trouble comes to all—let's hope they are getting theirs over early, for they're bonny bairns. Muriel is not quite so winning in her manner as Norman, but she has his sweet smile, and there's a rare depth in her. Bless them both, say I. Millicent, you've left two treasures in this world!"

END OF VOL. I.

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